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WE ARE BECOME DEATH:
CULTURAL SHOCKWAVES OF HIROSHIMA

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Abstract

This thesis, “We Are Become Death: Cultural Shockwaves of Hiroshima,” aims to achieve a greater understanding of what the atomic bomb *means* and what it can teach contemporary society, rather than to investigate the debates of policy and morality which tend to surround it. Towards this end, I briefly examine contemporary reactions to the bomb and “classically post-apocalyptic” works, revealing that of chief issue behind the dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a restrictive and arbitrary idea of what “life” was that did not properly include the Japanese people. Further, the disturbing and nostalgic means through which the bomb is understood, the *death view*, is explicated and rejected.

In search of a superior means of understanding the post-nuclear world, I turn to William S. Burroughs and his word virus theory, which I demonstrate to be explicitly linked to nuclear weaponry and discourse in *The Ticket That Exploded*, which brands the bomb as a symptom of the word virus, resulting in the provocative idea that the post-nuclear world existed *before* the bomb and *created* it, rather than the opposite. Burroughs depicts this world as a reality studio in which the films, representing prior thought formations, must be destroyed. Chief among these prior thought formations is the idea of one god essentialism. Burroughs’s culminating work *The Western Lands* is then investigated, in which the philosophy of silence is carried out in the form of a pilgrimage to the Ancient Egyptians’ place of immortality. Burroughs means to move us beyond the death view so that we might recognize the arbitrary nature of our languages, our innate ideas, and our fear of death. In doing so, an empowering and positive reading of the nuclear bomb is proposed, albeit one which makes the event itself all the more horrifying: the nuclear bomb serves as an event so immense and undeniable it might wake us up from our slumber, force us to recognize the issues of the word virus and lead us towards the Western Lands.

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Introduction: The Friendliest Place on Earth*

On July 15, 1945, the Manhattan Project, headed by nuclear physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and Brigadier General Leslie R. Groves, culminated in the world's first artificial nuclear explosion: the so-called Trinity test in Alamogordo, New Mexico (ironically, a city self-described as the "Friendliest Place on Earth"). Oppenheimer's oft-quoted reaction to the explosion has become a cultural paradigm, though sources disagree on precisely what was said. Oppenheimer himself recalled the reaction in a filmed interview in 1965:

We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*; Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." I suppose we all thought that, one way or another. (Atomic)

Less than a month later, atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing between one hundred fifty thousand and two hundred fifty thousand people, with untold others suffering and dying due to the effects of radiation exposure. The rest of the world was left wondering what it all meant.

Those bombings stand among the major events of human history as truly undeniable. Their horror, devastation, and pure power were so great as to not only elicit but, indeed, to *demand* a response, and society surely responded. The bomb has spawned novels, films, political movements, and even entire genres, yet, in spite of its ubiquitous presence in post-World War II art and culture, there is good reason to think that our society is still struggling to know the bomb's meaning – or, even worse, that we think we know but have in fact "misread" it. Thus, while it

* For recommended musical accompaniment to the reading of this thesis please see "CODA 3: An Experiment in Installing 'We Are Become Death.'"

might sound overly vague or simplistic, a question as fundamental as “What does the bomb mean?” is actually incredibly important and often ignored due to this deceptive simplicity. By examining the cultural shockwaves of Hiroshima, we can uncover new ways of answering this question. By a *cultural shockwave*, I refer to the ways in which such a significant cultural moment as the events of Hiroshima pervades our society and comes to define the perspectives of our culture, in particular our art. A shockwave moves at a velocity greater than the local speed of sound, and a *cultural shockwave* often works analogously. By this, I mean that tracing the cultural shockwaves of a moment is often much more complicated than, say, looking up which books are written about post-nuclear wastelands and atomic warfare. Often the most revealing of works will rarely mention the nuclear bomb specifically at all (see: Pynchon), or at least, as in the case is Burroughs, seem to be talking about a much broader theme, but they approach the world from a perspective that has been undeniably changed by it.

The American reactions to the bomb, particularly as expressed in mass media and traditional post-apocalyptic genre fiction, have provided a dominant – and quite pessimistic – answer, based on a particular reading of Oppenheimer’s famous quotation steeped in a fear for the annihilation of consciousness and the birth of absolute nothingness, in the strongest and most literal sense of those terms. In opposition, various post-war authors, usually operating from the postmodernist tradition, have provided alternative readings of this phrase. Chief among them is William Seward Burroughs – ironically an alumnus of the Los Alamos Ranch School, Oppenheimer’s inspiration for placing the Manhattan Project headquarters in the New Mexican desert (Morgan 44; Rhodes 450). While operating in a much less obviously nuclear model (though his atomic references are nonetheless frequent), Burroughs provides a theoretical basis for interpreting the bomb, its implications, and the hypothetical post-nuclear apocalypse in new ways,

repositioning the atomic bomb not as a transforming event but, rather, as an alarm clock, an undeniable moment that forces us to wake up and recognize the arbitrary and problematic restrictions that linguistic man has placed on the definition and understanding of life, a flaw that Burroughs, in *The Western Lands*, traces all the way back to the Ancient Egyptians.

The Birth of the Death View in the Classical Post-Apocalyptic Wasteland

Any meaning that the bomb has for humanity, of course, is through its relationship to humanity itself and life as we know it, so the question comes to be, “what does it mean to be alive in the post-nuclear world?” Such a question, in turn, is but a variation of the general inquiries into the definition or meaning of life that have dominated both the humanities and the sciences in different ways. The horrifying spectacle of the nuclear bomb blew a hole in our perceptions of what life was, fundamentally changing the game and challenging our definitions. The end of the world, the apocalypse, is not a post-nuclear idea by any means, but prior to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, such devastation could only be imagined, not witnessed. Throughout history, humankind has demonstrated an affinity for thinking it is living in the end of days, but such an end required the power of gods to be realized, or, at the worst, cosmic coincidences that humans had no control over (e.g. meteoric devastation or the death of the sun). Upon viewing for the first time a level of destruction so total and so directly attributable to the actions of humanity, we are naturally led to the same conclusion as Oppenheimer: *we* have become Death. William S. Burroughs famously remixed Oppenheimer’s quote as such in *The Place of Dead Roads*, but Burroughs is picking up on a general cultural reading of the phrase. “We have become Death” is understood to mean “we are all going to die,” that life ends with us and nothing will remain afterwards; furthermore, that death is attributable to a very specific instance of technology, the atomic bomb.

Such a reaction, which I will term the *death view*, became the primary cultural reading of the nuclear bombings, and is reflected in the classic post-nuclear wastelands depicted in the books and film of the Cold War period.

There are several issues with such a reading of the bomb, and Burroughs offers an alternative view that builds a more enlightened understanding of the bomb, but before their rejection of the death view makes sense, we must understand how it developed. The initial reaction to the bomb was quite distinct from the death view, in fact, because the cultural context of World War II and 1940s America presented a definition of life, particularly as understood by the cultural media of the time, that resisted the humanity of the Japanese people who had been subjected to the bomb's horrors. John Dower notes the intense dehumanization of Japanese people during World War II, whom were portrayed as "a nameless mass of vermin," writing that "[i]ncinerating Japanese in caves with flamethrowers was referred to as 'clearing out the rat's nest.' Soon after Pearl Harbor, the prospect of exterminating the Japanese vermin in their nest at home was widely applauded. The most popular float in a day-long victory parade in New York in mid-1942 was titled 'Tokyo: We Are Coming,' and depicted bombs falling on a frantic pack of yellow rats" (231). Arthur N. Feraru, writing in the *Far Eastern Survey*, notes that, in 1944, 13% of polled U.S. citizens advocated the complete extermination (or "killing off," as the poll itself phrased it) of all Japanese men, women, and children (101). If the truth behind the atomic bomb is that it demonstrates the intimate connection between humanity and the machines we create, as I find displayed in Burroughs, one can imagine the difficulties in such a view being accepted when we struggle to expand our definitions of life to even encompass all of our fellow humans.

It is in this context that one of the first post-nuclear films was produced but, interestingly enough, it was never shown. Produced by Lieutenant Daniel McGovern of the U.S. Strategic

Bombing Survey, *The Effects of the Atomic Bombs Against Hiroshima and Nagasaki* utilizes confiscated Japanese-filmed footage of the devastation, which McGovern attempted to salvage for public consumption, though his plans were frustrated and the film was suppressed and forgotten. The documentary, capturing various horrid images, was never shown until a print was discovered two decades later, the original negative having been lost. Abé Mark Nornes describes the documentary's status as perhaps the first post-apocalyptic horror film:

From a certain perspective, this is a mind-numbingly boring science film; from another, it is a horror film that leaves one speechless and trembling. Most filmmakers trying to represent events as extreme as the holocaust or the atomic bombings run up against the specter of the unrepresentable [*sic*]. The strange thing about this film is that the filmmakers never make this effort to begin with. They simply describe the two events in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the dry language of hard science. Nothing could be more unnerving.

The Effects of the Atomic Bombs thus represents possibly the first step away from the initial, enthusiastic reactions to the bomb (though it clearly lacked much empathic connection to its subject) and towards the notion that the bomb's existence symbolized death and destruction, rather than power and supremacy. It zoomed in the camera towards the mushroom cloud, revealing the shocking images behind its veil. However, its suppression kept the post-apocalyptic genre from developing in a direction focused on the Japanese victims themselves.

Without a film like *The Effects of the Atomic Bombs* to educate the public, and with other such footage expressing the more inhuman aspects of the bombings hidden from view, American society was left with only the photos of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the footage of the post-World War II nuclear test at Bikini Atoll. These photographs of the devastation (at least the ones that reached the public), taken by an aircraft named, of all things, *Necessary Evil*, were mostly limited to shots of the mushroom clouds. Silent, they expressed their impressive power through sheer visual might while the voices of the Japanese victims remained unheard. The Bikini Atoll footage

provided a particularly perverse sort of star vehicle, with Rita Hayworth's likeness placed across the bombshell (the pun was certainly intended). These images of explosions and mushroom clouds expressed triumph and power to a public who were able to ignore the untold horrors experienced by the Japanese people, as the American media edited the graphic images of the attack (*Trinity*; Boyer 239).

Eventually, the fervor of the initial reactions was quelled, and the bomb became subject to moral debate. However, these moral debates seem to largely miss the point. Such debates amount to, ultimately, a perverse comparison of the lives of Japanese civilians and Japanese and American troops, in which figures calculated by the Joint Chiefs of Staff assuming "1.78 fatalities per 1,000 man-days" (resulting in 380,000 American dead) are balanced against the impact of the atomic bombings on civilian lives (Frank 135-7). Such debates fail to address the question of utmost importance: beyond whether or not the bomb should have been dropped, what has its dropping done to humanity as a whole, and American civilization, the most responsible, in particular? (Of course, the Japanese perspective is at least as important, and probably more so, as the American, but a true and dedicated examination of that perspective is beyond the scope of this project.) To determine the answer, we must return to the original and most effective means through which the bomb was transmitted, in spite of the shameful awe it inspired in 1940s America: film. In a way, the first nuclear film may have been the bomb itself – a film that destroys its audience – but did it destroy the survivors as well, its audience from afar? Was Oppenheimer right that the surviving world has, indeed, become death?

The classic and quintessential post-apocalyptic genre films suggest he was. Typified by desert landscapes, rampant death and desolation, and a few wandering survivors who persist but ultimately give in to their inevitable fate, these films mark a disturbing trend in nuclear cinema that

might have been quelled had a film like *The Effects of the Atomic Bombs* been more widely viewed. Rather than reflecting regret and sympathy towards the events in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, their consequentialist plots seem less disturbed by the initial (read: non-fictional) attacks on Japan and more concerned with how they might result in attacks on or contamination of the American landscape on which the films almost universally take place. Regardless, it seems clear that the glory of the 1940s has substantially faded (or, at least, moved into the background) by the time a film like *The Day After*, which depicts a full scale nuclear war between the United States and Soviet Union, is released in 1983, and certainly by the time of *Fallout 3*, a 2008 video game based in an alternate future in which America, and specifically Washington D.C., has been completely devastated by nuclear exchange, leaving behind a Western-themed world inhabited by wanderers, mutants, and mercenaries.

The two works are extremely different in their general approaches; *The Day After* combines ostensible realism, cheesy if classically post-apocalyptic special effects, and a plot depressing to the point of exploitation, whereas *Fallout 3* places itself squarely in the science-fiction genre, combining a realistic (if decimated) D.C. setting with oversized weaponry, radioactive giants known as “Super Mutants,” and an ever-present sense of irony and humor. Both works nonetheless share theoretical similarities. They are both marked by their desert landscapes, wandering characters, and fetishization of the nuclear bomb, but even more importantly, both operate under nuclear ideologies informed by Oppenheimer’s reading of the *Bhagavad Gita* – that is, the death view.

The desolate landscapes of the works, located in Kansas City, Missouri and Washington, D.C. respectively, fill the viewer with an overriding sense of absence and emptiness: specifically an absence of life. There is no plant-life, no rushing water, with the color green only evoking the

glow of radiation. *The Day After* depicts many scenes in which characters walk across this landscape for many miles (often in search of medical aid), just as the nameless main character of *Fallout 3*, who becomes known simply as “the Lone Wanderer,” does. Combined with the desert-like settings, this recalls the great American Westerns and lends an almost comforting aspect to the post-apocalyptic world, especially in *Fallout*, which features many explicit Western parallels – mercenaries, ghost towns, shoot outs, and general lawlessness. Thus, the post-apocalyptic world is not just an end, but a *return* to a nostalgic time.

The works also show that the glorified qualities of a nuclear explosion have not entirely left us. *Fallout 3* does this in its entire basis, but one detail of particular note is an extremely powerful weapon in the game known as the Fat Man (which was the codename of the bomb dropped on Nagasaki), a missile launcher that fires small nuclear bombs, leaving behind miniature mushroom clouds. *The Day After*, meanwhile, depicts its nuclear devastation in a three minute scene filled with more mushroom clouds, explosions, desperate screams, and skeletons than perhaps any other three minute segment in film history, lending an air of distastefulness and snuff that is stretched across the film’s narrative, which mostly consists of people slowly but surely succumbing to radiation sickness. Indeed, the survivors in the film are not particularly successful at all; their survival largely being portrayed as being worse than death. Even in the world of *Fallout 3*, where life persists relatively successfully (as it must due to the mechanics of a sandbox-style video game with no strict end time), it seems the world is no longer *designed* for life. Life persists *in spite of* it, but ultimately will succumb to the nothingness. The ideology of the “survival is worse than death” plotlines present the troubling proposition that the victims of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the fictional bombings were the lucky ones, with center stage being given to the depicted American survivors who must contend with the nuclear power *they* unleashed upon the world, eventually

giving into death. (Such an ideology regretfully ignores the *Japanese* survivors who seemingly have been so ignored since the repression of *The Effects of the Atomic Bombs*.) Dr. Oakes, the main character of *The Day After*, wanders back to his Kansas City home at the end of the film to gaze upon his house's remains one last time before his death. The Lone Wanderer of *Fallout* sacrifices his own life so that the struggling lives of the Capital Wasteland might continue a little bit longer. In so giving into death, however, the survivors are empowered and comforted in that they are able to end their lives on their own terms, just as human life as a whole, in an act of seeming and perverse honor, ends on *its* own terms.

These films thus demonstrate how the nuclear apocalypse is profoundly different from the floods and Ragnaröks of cultures past. Steven Kull observes that the post-nuclear mindset is marked by “the impression that there is an unidentified moving force impelling people toward a fate that no one wishes,” something he connects to a long history of human desire for world destruction, but whereas “the various images of deity and of the world itself that have been developed in different cultures often depict such an impersonal force that moves toward the destruction of the world,” nuclear destruction is directly attributed to *man*, who in becoming death, as Oppenheimer prophesized, elevates to a status previously reserved for the gods (571). Thus, while horrifying and somber, *The Day After* and *Fallout 3* depict a certain *longing* for the apocalypse. Their images evoke the ecstasy of the nuclear explosion, its awe-inspiring characteristics, and the quintessentially American Western film, lending an air of romanticism to the wasteland. In fact, the response of awe is in line with the public reaction to the *first* nuclear films: the (macro) footage of the actual bombings themselves, to which awe was the overriding, often exclusive response of the American public. It is only when confronted with the micro-image – the bomb's real effects on its casualties and survivors – that the true horror slips in, the idea that

we have become the destroyer of worlds. The initial response to the bomb's fantastic qualities are thus quelled by a dread for its real world effects – although the fantastic never completely goes away, as evidenced by our insistence on (some might call it an addiction to or fascination with) capturing the explosion itself on film, over and over again. This phenomenon forms an uneasy tension that is laced throughout these post-apocalyptic films: the tug of war between the bang and the whimper. The bang ignites glory, the whimper ignites shame and horror, but both result in the end.

Film proves to be the perfect medium through which we express our obsession with the end, due to the bomb's nature as a profoundly visual weapon. It is the fear, transmitted through sheer visual might, that the bomb places in the rest of the world that makes it so effective, that allows it to end World War II. It puts humanity in a new role as *witnesses* of the power of the apocalypse, as an *audience* for the end – not merely imaginers of it. Post-apocalyptic film and visual media continue the story started in New Mexico in 1945, depicting the post-nuclear world as one in which life is snuffed out and death and desolation take its place, forcing humanity into the role of witness and audience member to the spectacle. The worlds of *The Day After* and *Fallout 3* seem to be symptomatic of a culture unable to come to terms with the immensity of the nuclear bombings. Mushroom clouds that once instilled national pride now instill horror and shame, the apparent inevitability of a world without life seems harder and harder to deny, yet this post-apocalyptic mindset might yet be faulty. By returning to the place where it all started – July 16, 1945 in Alamogordo, New Mexico – we find reason for questioning the death view, for developing a new perspective on the post-apocalyptic world in which life does not merely cease, but changes.

A closer examination of the *Bhagavad Gita* verses, which popped into Oppenheimer's

head upon viewing the spectacle of that first nuclear explosion, reveal another side to what it means to live in a post-apocalyptic world, what *life* means in a post-apocalyptic world. As he worked towards the development of a means of planetary annihilation, Oppenheimer went to the *Gita*, “one of his favorite books,” and found in it a justification for his actions and “encouragement that steadied him in his work,” for the *Gita* told Oppenheimer, as he interpreted it, that he had a particular duty, that of a nuclear physicist, and it was his job to pursue the bomb for that reason only, “not because he was intent on obtaining any particular result” (Hijiya 125). Speaking to the workers of Los Alamos, some months after the bombings of Japan, Oppenheimer stated, “If you are a scientist, you cannot stop such a thing... If you are a scientist you believe... that it is good to turn over to mankind at large the greatest possible power to control the world and to deal with it according to its lights and values” (Hijiya 137). Yet, Oppenheimer’s citation of the *Gita* is incomplete and even inaccurate, for he confuses Krishna with Vishnu. Indeed, while Krishna becomes death, this can also be translated as time, and both of these are just singular aspects of what is truly an all-encompassing entity. As the *Gita* continues, Arjuna praises Krishna, saying:

You are the original Personality of Godhead, the oldest, the ultimate sanctuary of this manifested cosmic world. You are the knower of everything, and You are all that is knowable. You are the supreme refuge, above the material modes. O limitless form!
... You are air, and You are the supreme controller! You are fire,
You are water, and You are the moon! You are Brahma, the first living creature (Gita)

Thus, a fuller sampling of the *Gita* presents us an image not just of an all-encompassing being but of a profoundly *vital* and *life-based* being existing as the representational hub of a world of profound interconnectedness. Such a reading of the *Gita* would suggest a post-apocalyptic world which is far from doomed, wherein life can persist in “limitless form.” Of course, the future may not be controlled by the Hindu scriptures, but just as Oppenheimer’s interpretation of the *Gita*

informed his actions and reflected the post-apocalyptic mindset and culture he helped unleash, an interconnected reading of the *Gita* demonstrates a new possibility for looking at the post-apocalyptic world. This interconnectedness, though, requires that we abandon much of the fundamental logic found in the variety of post-apocalyptic media we have examined. As noted, films like *The Day After* are primarily concerned with the singular status of its survivors, their loneliness, their disconnect from (and jealousy of) the dead. They fail to recognize the dynamic nature of the connection between the survivors, the dead, the original victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the bomb itself. They seek to temper their survivors' horrid lot with tragic romanticism and nostalgia. In the end, they portray futures of death, but the future of life is not death, it is evolution. The ultimate struggle of the post-nuclear world is not determining how we are going to die, but determining what it means to live in a world in which such an undeniable event, which we are all connected to, has happened. Of course, such a mission might find the answer to be even more terrifying than the desolate wastelands of the apocalypse and their comforting finality.

The Word Virus of William S. Burroughs

William S. Burroughs, like other post-war, postmodern authors, proposes a reading of the nuclear age that looks towards a human society without individuals as the real problem behind the bomb. In other words, the bomb is not a virus which infects society with the disease of apocalyptic fear; rather, it is a *symptom* of a disease already present in society *prior to* the bombs' droppings. Burroughs distinguishes himself, however, by taking it one step further: the bomb is not just a symptom of the postmodernist, post-industrial, bureaucratic age which Pynchon's Slothrop attempts to understand at the sacrifice of his individuality – the bomb is a symptom of a virus that

has infected humanity for as far back as history stretches: language itself.

Burroughs's conception of language as a disease – the so-called word virus – is one of his most famous and pervasive theories. The word virus permeates all of Burroughs's work, but in his novel *The Ticket That Exploded* he goes into particular depth to explain both the word virus itself and its connection to the atomic bomb, which, while lurking in the background of the entire Burroughs's corpus, is made explicit and undeniable here. For Burroughs, the bomb did not, in fact, change anything, at least fundamentally, for he positions it as a natural consequence of language and the restrictive life definitions inherent to our understanding of language. Burroughs's plots are often inscrutable, and his villains, such as the Nova Mob who dominate *The Ticket That Exploded*, exist in a strange space between being mere concepts and actual characters. In spite of such confusions, that resist traditional literary analysis, Burroughs makes his atomic position relatively clear. A close examination of *The Ticket That Exploded*'s moments of philosophical lucidity and clarity makes the workings of the word virus and its connection to the nuclear age undeniable, providing the basis for atomic readings of Burroughs's later novels, *The Place of Dead Roads* and *The Western Lands*, which seek to further understand and combat the nuclear issue by introducing the problematic concept of machine life, which helps to break down the strict definitions and categories that fuel the word virus and thus free humanity from its infection.

The chief characteristics applied to language in the word virus theory are its arbitrariness (i.e. its unessential connection to humanity) and its debilitating effect. The arbitrary qualities of linguistic systems have a long history, but perhaps the most iconic figures of that history are the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the seminal philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who addressed such issues in his early work. Saussure conceived of language as “a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous

presence of the others,” rendering the idea of “inherent” meaning naive, if not absurd (969). For example, there is no particularly reason to refer to a tree as a “tree,” as evidenced by the fact that different languages have different, unrelated words for a tree. We refer to it as such out of, essentially, habit and convenience. Nietzsche takes this a step further by saying that the idea of thinking of all trees as possessing some sort of “tree-ness” that categorizes them together is really just an illusion – a metaphor that we have forgotten is a metaphor. The things we call trees have no true connection; we are engaging in the metaphorical operation of relating them based on perceived similarities, but, having forgotten about this process, think of the objects as inherently related. Nietzsche refers to this process as “making equivalent that which is non-equivalent,” and through this process not only are the specific instances of language arbitrary, but the idea of language itself is arbitrary; the concept of a linguistic system is likewise a metaphor we have forgotten is a metaphor (877).

Burroughs’s word virus concept is highly influenced by these ideas of linguistic arbitrariness but with a heightened sense of nefariousness (on the part of the words). Burroughs captures these two qualities in *The Ticket That Exploded* during a passage of extensive exposition on the word virus concept – calling it the “Other Half,” implying language’s role as a separate, parasitic, and unessential:

The “Other Half” is the word. The “Other Half” is an organism. Word is an organism. . . yes quite an angle it is the “Other Half” worked quite some years on a symbiotic basis. From symbiosis to parasitism is a short step. The word is now a virus. . . It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that *forces you to talk*. (49)

The idea that language originally operated symbiotically reflects the arbitrary but convenient logic

of Saussure's linguistic theory. For Burroughs, humans are not inherently linguistic beings, but they developed their symbiotic relationship with language, described as a unique organism with a mind of its own, due to the great benefit for society of linguistic communication. However, language quickly stops being one of multiple communication tools, one of multiple means of understanding the world, and takes over the human mind to the point where non-linguistic communication, or even *thought*, seems impossible. Language's transition from symbiosis to parasitism captures the utter domination of language over our thought processes through the virus metaphor. The common, often subconscious, misconception that there is a substantive, non-arbitrary relationship between our words and our meanings (or, in Saussure's terms, between the signifier and the signified) is this virus' main symptom, and, devilishly, its nature prevents us from realizing we are infected. Having forgotten, as Nietzsche realized, that *all* of language is composed of metaphors, and, indeed, that the very idea of language as a word-structuring system is metaphorical, we open ourselves up to the manipulation of the word virus. Language "forces [us] to talk" and makes it virtually impossible to "achieve even ten seconds of inner silence," without the internal linguistic voice shouting out from within us. We do not recognize this phenomenon as a problem because we assume the linguistic inner voice is inherent and necessary, that it is impossible to think *without language*, but Burroughs, convinced that language is a parasite, recognizes that language cannot be without us, but that we can certainly exist outside of language, even if we have forgotten how.

Burroughs's recognition of the word virus's manipulative qualities help to explain his preoccupation with all systems and methods of (mind) control. The intense study of addiction found in *Junky*, the manipulative brain surgeries of *Naked Lunch*, and the secret government crime agencies and invading alien crime organizations of the trilogies suggest a similar world of

complex, de-individualizing associations to the paranoid universe of *Gravity's Rainbow*, in which humanity is in constant danger of being manipulated and destroyed by forces much more substantive than the word virus. Unlike Pynchon, however, Burroughs has little interest in the paranoid approach to such a reality: the obsession of understanding the multitudinous conspiracy that connects everything. Given the fate of both Slothrop and the reader of *Gravity's Rainbow* to be completely subsumed by the conspiracy they attempt to understand, one can understand Burroughs's reasons. He seeks no end to be discovered in such a task because, in fact, "*control can never be a means to any practical end . . . It can never be a means to anything but more control*" (*Naked* 137). Whereas Pynchon's characters attempt to *understand* the systems of control, Burroughs's attempt to *undermine* them.

As much as his novels present a world overwhelmed by control systems, the most understandable passages, which become even more emphasized to the reader through their juxtaposition with chaos via the cut-up method, often consist of rather direct instructions for undermining those systems, as well as organizations, such as the Nova Police of the Nova Trilogy and the Johnson Family of the Red Night Trilogy, who embrace randomness and uncertainty against organizations based around regimented control and precise definitions – essentially creating a battle between the arbitrary and the non-arbitrary (or, more accurately, the recognizably arbitrary and that which thinks it is not arbitrary). Burroughs introduces both the types of organization to the reader at the same time as *The Ticket That Exploded*'s central character Inspector Lee, writing, "In this organization, Mr Lee, we do not encourage togetherness, *esprit de corps*. We do not give our agents the impression of belonging. As you know most existing organizations stress such primitive reactions as unquestioning obedience. Their agents become addicted to orders" (*Ticket* 9). Burroughs notes of their methods that "[t]here are worse things than

death Mr Lee for example to live under the conditions your enemies will endeavor to impose,” and this resistance to destruction, in favor of manipulation, reflects the control society’s origins in and associations with language (9). Their aim of unquestioned obedience is mirrored in their very structure and nature, which are based around a control as rigid as that which they would impose on humanity; their agents’ addiction to orders, in this sense, reflects humanity’s addiction to language, the most successful control system of all.

Ironically, Burroughs uses writing as his chosen means of bringing the word’s viral nature to humanity’s attention. His entire literary philosophy consists of methods of forcing the reader to recognize the fact that the novel he or she reads exists within an arbitrary universe which is at the mercy of the words used to describe it. Burroughs does not imagine worlds which he then struggles to put into “the right words.” Rather, he *actively constructs* worlds that, in spite of their verging on the nonsensical, mean to bring the constructed nature of the *actual* world to the reader’s attention. Chief among these techniques is the cut-up method. By introducing random elements into his writing that not even *he* has any say over, Burroughs counteracts the control of the word virus, which even has influence of his own mind. This randomness, combined with his general avoidance of traditional plot structure and character development, creates a defamiliarizing effect on the reader, forcing them to closely examine the text, conscious of its status *as* text, rather than simply absorb it passively (which would be playing into the word virus’s hands).

The organizations *within* Burroughs’s novels which attempt to *compete* with the control systems thus, mirroring his literary methodology, must, beyond having opposing aspirations, adhere to a fundamentally different *logic* from the controlling organizations, as do the Nova Police, in their eschewing of belonging, togetherness, *esprit de corps*, and even certainty: “There is no certainty. Those who need certainty are of no interest to this department. This is in point of

fact a *non-organization* the aim of which is to immunize our agents against fear despair and death. We intend to break the birth-death cycle” (*Ticket* 10). Burroughs thus presents a philosophy that is not just opposed to the obvious control segments of society (to which we might point to a variety of culprits: governments, corporations, police forces, drug enforcement agencies, educational institutions, etc.) but is, in fact, opposed to the basic concept of organization itself, which is an outgrowth or symptom of the word virus, as well as the very ideas of order and truth which must be assumed in a non-arbitrary linguistic philosophy which forgets it is a metaphor. One might interpret Burroughs’s philosophy as clamoring for a dark, anarchic world, and an even darker and more anarchic literature, in which nothing means anything, and thus classify his philosophy as negative or even destructive; however, it is actually very positive and liberating in its aims to “break the birth-death cycle.” By reducing death and life to linguistic categories without inherent meanings, Burroughs’s philosophy allows for a true and complete defeat of the death view of post-nuclear life. In this sense Burroughs presents a much more revolutionary, and one might say optimistic, reading of the post-nuclear, systematized universe than Oppenheimer and his contemporaries. Rather than a world at the brink of annihilation in which the only possible responses are resignation to one’s fate and hope for or obsession with a life *after* death, this is a world in which the fate branded on humanity by the atomic bomb can be *defeated*, a world in which “[a] camera and two tape recorders can cut the lines laid down by a fully equipped film studio” (*Ticket* 111).

The Word That Exploded: The Linguistic Structure of the Bomb

While Burroughs's interests in the word virus and control society (which he, importantly, depicted as a "reality studio") are clear enough, one might reasonably request justification for the subsequent idea that the nuclear bomb is a *consequence of language*. Such a claim is not as controversial as it first seems, however, when broken down into parts. The idea that control society develops as a result of the word virus is not only clearly present in Burroughs's writing, as shown above, but is in many ways the quintessential Burroughsian claim. The control society flaunts the same parasitic, essentialist qualities as language and inherits from it an ambition for absolute, inescapable determination and limitation of humanity.

A sterilized reading of Burroughs might propose that his plots, laden with assassins' guilds, nefarious CIA analogues, and parasitic alien beings (such as the Nova Mob of *The Ticket That Exploded*, whom will be analyzed in greater detail below) consist of mere metaphorical or allegorical representations of his word virus philosophy, which stands as the ultimate "positive claim" of the Burroughs corpus. Another, equally sterilized reading, might propose the opposite: that the conception of language as a virus is the metaphor, that Burroughs is using viral imagery and linguistic terms in order to *create* (rather than recognize or discover) a word virus which we may use as a means for understanding the actual methods of control that exist (i.e. the control society is now the positive claim). Both of these readings should be rejected, for *both* the control society and the word virus are, in Burroughs's philosophy, very substantial things. Positive evidence for such a claim may seem weak, for while Burroughs consistently states his positions in a very direct and literal manner (e.g. "Word is an organism"), the nature of metaphor makes it so we can never adequately prove that Burroughs is actually being literal (*Ticket* 49). However, I would suggest that sufficient evidence for a literal understanding of Burroughs (both in general

and in regards to the “realness” of the word virus and the control society themselves) can be obtained through the combination of his unforgiving, “straight” writing style, his resistance to traditional literary models and modes (which, we could presume, include resistance to traditional literary methods of interpretation), and the lack of evidence for *why* we should read Burroughs metaphorically, other than the fact that it makes his work more palatable. While it can be useful to utilize Burroughs’s theories metaphorically, to extrapolate them towards making larger cultural claims, which is something I myself will engage in (e.g. the idea that Burroughs’s machine life concept can serve as a metaphor for American culture’s resistance to admitting the humanity of African, Japanese, etc. peoples), let it not be lost that Burroughs’s means for his theories to be taken, at the same time, very literally (e.g. that the idea that machines could and may be *alive*, in a way that causes us to reevaluate our understanding of the term, is a very real issue).

Having thus established the corporeality of the control society in Burroughs (as well as of the word virus), we can recognize that the nuclear bomb is obviously a product of that control society. It is relatively uncontroversial, or at least less controversial than we might think, to accept Burroughs’s claim that the word virus spawns the control society, but the idea that the nuclear bomb results from the control society seems even less difficult. In fact, various other writers have maintained such a position, most notably Thomas Pynchon, whose *Gravity’s Rainbow* presents a vision of control society as all-encompassing, incommensurable, and ultimately destructive to both individuals-in-themselves and the very concept of individual in general. Pynchon’s main character, Slothrop, attempts to understand the conspiracy that underlies the war and manipulation his world is subjected to, and he, more importantly, tries to comprehend his place in it all. The control society, however, views Slothrop only as a tool, an information-transporting device akin to a sentient, two-legged flashdrive. Slothrop’s sexual conquests correlate to the locations of V-2

bombings, but there is nothing about Slothrop *himself* that is of interest to the various acronym-branded organizations that seek him out and attempt to manipulate his actions. Slothrop is only useful to the control society in that his actions can be *mapped* – literally – as in the map he keeps at his desk chronicling the women he has slept with. The control society wishes to take an individual like Slothrop, in all his eccentricity and familial history, and reduce him to a map, to a graph, to *information*, to completely reduce his individuality to nameless statistics. Burroughs's picture of the world as a reality studio, which I will examine in greater detail below, imagines reality *as equal to* the process of transforming singularities into information (on the medium of film).

Slothrop's privileged position as *Gravity's Rainbow's* protagonist would normally offer him a degree of protection from such a fate, for even if the control society defeats Slothrop in the literal happenings of the plot, the novel will nonetheless irrevocably remain Slothrop's story: his defeat will always be understood, by the reader, as happening *to him* in some way that no death, imprisonment, or any other fate could take away; Slothrop's worst case scenario seems to be one of martyrdom for the cause of the individual. However, Pynchon quickly and cruelly demonstrates that *Gravity's Rainbow* is not Slothrop's story at all: it is the story of the control society. Slothrop completely disappears from the final sections of the narrative without comment or explanation. He has been completely subsumed by the conspiracy in his attempt to reduce it to understandable terms. Pynchon thus forces us to recognize that our assumption that Slothrop was the subject of *Gravity's Rainbow* was faulty. He was merely the object of the novel, but in his *ultimate* fate, Slothrop no longer exists even as a cog in the conspiratory machine; all evidence of his existence merely evaporates into the confused narrative. The new object of *Gravity's Rainbow* is then the reader his or herself, and when Pynchon ends his novel with the cry "Now everybody—" he

presents a vision of the future in which the control society subsumes *all* individuals as it has subsumed Slothrop (776). The ultimate result of such a process is a world in which the very idea of the individual no longer exists, in which a single person is nothing and can accomplish nothing. Under such constrictions, the individual sees little hope in rebelling against the control society, for the control society offers no recognition of his rebellion. Rebellion in such a de-individualized world exists only in hushed tones and wordless disappearances. This is the world that produces the nuclear bomb.

Indeed, Pynchon's great contribution in *Gravity's Rainbow* is demonstrating this production, for his narrative takes place in an explicitly pre-nuclear universe. The great weapon of *Gravity's Rainbow* is the V-2 rocket, not the bomb, and the victim is England, not Japan, yet *Gravity's Rainbow* is being written and read in a post-nuclear universe, in which it is impossible to read a World War II-based novel revolving around weapons that scream across the sky without making explicitly nuclear associations. Pynchon must recognize this, and is, indeed, writing *about* the nuclear bomb (or, in other words, the post-nuclear world) *without* writing about the nuclear bomb. Through his examination of the death of the individual in a pre-nuclear universe, he demonstrates that the nuclear bomb's dropping did *not* kill the individual; rather, the individual had to die in order to create the kind of society in which a nuclear bomb would be produced. He also demonstrates that there is no inherent connection between the problems that create the bomb (which we might call the nuclear worldview or discourse) and the specific technology that is the bomb itself. Getting rid of a specific technology will not help us, because the nuclear worldview will simply manifest itself through a different technology, as it does through the V-2 rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow* (under different circumstances we could just as easily be living in a post-Vergeltungswaffe world).

Burroughs established that the control society results from the word virus, and Pynchon has provided us with ample evidence to conclude that the nuclear bomb is a result of this control society. Thus, a simple application of the transitive property leads us to the claim that at first glance seemed so difficult and controversial: the word virus created the nuclear bomb, which is merely a symptom of its disease. In spite of the acceptability of its parts ($a = b$ and $b = c$), however, we might still have trouble accepting such a seemingly incongruous result ($a = c$) – that a weapon of divine destruction resulted from mere words. Indeed, perhaps it is worth questioning whether mathematical logic should be applied to an author who is trying to blast a *whole* in our common assumptions, to point out the falseness in the inherent truths of our language-enslaved perspective. Burroughs, however, makes the connection between the word virus and the nuclear virus (as I might recast the death view in Burroughsian terminology) explicit and undeniable in *The Ticket That Exploded* through the nature and methodology of its villainous alien characters and organizations.

Burroughs introduces a Venusian invasion, a common motif of his novels, under the codename “Operation Other Half,” recalling the previously dissected passage in which the word virus is branded with the same alias; these invaders are noted as being “[a]rmed with nuclear weapons” (*Ticket* 51). Language is thus described not only as a virus but also as an alien invasion armed with atomic bombs; the plot of Burroughs’s novels, to the degree a plot is discernible, is often motivated by a few individuals struggling against such invasions. Equally strong evidence of the word-nuclear connection is provided by a District Supervisor figure, whom this passage focuses on. Burroughs describes his struggling with how to deal with the nuclear-armed 5th Colonists as he writes, “The D.S. was contemplating the risky expedient of a ‘miracle’ and the miracle he contemplated was *silence*” (*Ticket* 51). In this sentence, Burroughs reinforces the

connection between nuclear and lingual viruses while simultaneously prescribing a treatment. The D.S., facing off against nuclear-armed adversaries, recognizes that the only effective response is one of silence, one coming from *outside* language. Burroughs's belief that nuclear arms must be dealt with non-linguistically clearly suggests that nuclear arms are but a symptom and aspect of the larger word virus problem. His recommended countermeasure, the blast of silence, attempts to call to our attention the intrinsic connection between both the nuclear armed and the nuclear devastated. Such a truth is difficult to transmit from within language due to the fact that the discourse of the nuclear bomb, which one is thus forced to operate in, establishes as a matter of course the inherent *difference* between these two, but Burroughs maintains that if we are to take a "forward step" it "must be made in silence," and we must thus "detach ourselves from word forms" (Interview). Burroughs rejects a political or diplomatic response, which would be entrenched in those very word forms, when he tells us that his advice for politicians is for them to "[t]ell the truth for once and for all and shut up forever" (Interview).

Like language, the logic of the bomb, and indeed of all weaponry, resolves around ideas of separation, even at the most basic levels of functionality. Almost all forms of weaponry are based on the physical principle that two things cannot be in the same place at the same time. This begins obviously with melee weapons such as swords and axes, swordplay being a task in forcing one's blade into the same location as the enemy's vital organs. This same principle applies to projectile weapons, which present a safer and more distanced means of achieving the same result. Defense systems such as armor and bulletproof vests, meanwhile, with the goal of preventing a blade or bullet from occupying the same space as the wearer, operate under the logic as well. Thus, while the nuclear bomb, at first glance, might seem to be a completely different sort of weapon from a pistol, a bow and arrow, or a lance, all merely use different functional methods to achieve the same

goal. Additionally, the functionality of Little Boy, the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima, is actually much more gun-like than one might think. Known as a *gun-type fission weapon*, Little Boy essentially contains a hollow “bullet” of uranium within it which, when fired towards the solid piece of uranium in the bomb’s tip, results in a nuclear chain reaction (Glasstone).

The bomb thus seems inherently linguistic in its character, for both language and nuclear weaponry are systems of separation, the basic idea of language being one of dividing the world in to different “things” which are then given particular names and definitions which erroneously are seen as their natural boundaries. Returning to the nuclear standoff of *The Ticket That Exploded*, we see Burroughs painting not just the bomb and the word in separation terms, but also sex, when he writes, “all human sex is this unsanitary arrangement whereby two entities attempt to occupy the same three-dimensional coordinate points giving rise to the sordid latrine brawls which have characterized a planet based on ‘the Word,’ that is, on separate flesh engaged in endless sexual conflict” (52). Even an idea as seemingly uncontroversial as the “separate flesh” of our planet’s inhabitants is attributed to the word virus. Sex, as an attempt to force two beings into the same space in opposition to fundamental physical principles, serves as a sort of perverse rebellion against the Venusian-imposed concept of flesh (and word) separation. In response, the character Johnny Yen, one of the Nova Mob, who is described as “errand boy from the death trauma” and leader of the Venusian Boy-Girls, takes control over the Other Half, “imposing a sexual blockade on the planet,” illustrating the disturbing nature of the sex act to the Venusians and establishing its rebellious character (*Ticket* 52-3). Of course, under the “same place, same time” principle, a *truly* successful sex act (i.e. one in which “two entities [occupied] the same three-dimensional coordinate points”) would be akin to suicide, but Burroughs asks for us to leave such linear and essentialist life models behind when he writes, “Death *is* orgasm *is* rebirth *is* death in orgasm *is*

their unsanitary Venusian gimmick *is* the whole birth death cycle of action – You got it? – Now do you understand who Johnny Yen is?” (*Ticket* 53). True orgasm may be akin to death, but the very concepts of death and orgasm are themselves mere effects of the “unsanitary Venusian gimmick” that is language; the entire birth/death narrative is a constructed one; “death in orgasm” is as much a rebirth as it is an end, as Burroughs shall fully realize in *The Western Lands*, itself a journey through (the linguistic category of) death towards immortality.

Burroughs’s question of Johnny Yen’s identity, though, remains unanswered, but it seems clear to the reader, by this point, that Johnny Yen, like all of the Nova Mob, is a personification of the word virus, the “Other Half.” Burroughs answers his own question with a variety of titles which reflect Yen’s nature as a linguistic, viral being:

The Boy-Girl Other Half strip tease God of sexual frustration –
Errand boy from the death trauma – His immortality depends on the
mortality of others – The same is true of *all* addicts... His life line is
the human junky – The life line of control addicts is the control word
– That is these so-called Gods can only live without
three-dimensional coordinate points by forcing three-dimensional
bodies on others – Their existence is pure vampirism (*Ticket* 53)

In this passage, Burroughs utilizes the word virus’s own weapon (language) against itself. As a writer, he is able to manipulate the words that a being like Johnny Yen relies on to control humanity and in doing so gains a measure of power and determination over Yen’s identity, akin to Yen and the Nova Mob’s power and determination over the definitions of life, death, and orgasm. Thus is the danger of language as a control system and what enables it to be co-opted by writers like Burroughs towards revolutionary, anti-establishment ends. In using language to limit the agency of a population, those in charge of the control society become subjected to its limitations as much as the population. The best possible reading for the control society is that they are willingly operating under language’s rules, which makes them perhaps as susceptible to control as the

populace but at least conscious of their predicament, yet it seems more likely that the control society has utilized language to separate and subsequently forgotten the separating act, convincing itself that its own machinations are in fact natural. Burroughs, and Nietzsche before him, give the sense that such issues of amnesia are an aspect of the nature of language itself, and thus par for the course. Nietzsche sees the “first step towards the acquisition of... truth” as occurring when “a way of designating things is invented which has the same validity and force everywhere,” that is, when language enters the arena, drawing firm lines in the sand between truth and falsehood, yet due to their constructed nature, Nietzsche is convinced that “[o]nly through forgetfulness could human beings ever entertain the illusion that they possess truth” (876). This forgetfulness underlies the entire process of language formation, for in order to form a concept like the word “leaf,” which encapsulates many different objects-in-themselves with many different particular characteristics, one must “[drop] these individuals differences arbitrarily... so that the concept then gives rise to the notion that something other than leaves exists in nature, something which would be ‘leaf’, a primal form, say, from which all leaves were woven” (877). The control society thus must necessarily be forgetting the constructed nature of their arbitrary distinctions *as they construct them*.

For a writer like Burroughs, who is so conscious of the control society, this is a very liberating and empowering fact. Burroughs will utilize his chosen weapon to much more effective and less pessimistic ends than a writer like Pynchon does in conspiracy narratives such as *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *The Crying of Lot 49* because, rather than using language to *understand* and map out the control society, which is ultimately incommensurable and leads only to the assimilation of the conspiracy theorist *into* the conspiracy, essentially rendering them castrated and lobotomized as potential revolutionary agents, Burroughs will be using language to *fight back*.

In branding Johnny Yen the “[e]rrand boy from the death trauma,” he defines Yen and the other Nova Mob members as slaves of the very categories they claim to be utilizing as methods of control. Yen thinks “death”-as-category is his weapon, but in reality Yen is nothing but a byproduct of “death”-as-category, a Burroughsian phantasm, linguistic death conjured in physical form so it can be destroyed. Having so conjured him, Burroughs is able reformulate Yen in terms of the drug addict, a life Burroughs has lived and explored to great depth in his first novel *Junky*, showing that those behind the control society are actually *addicted* to their control, and thus as dependent on it as a junky is on heroin. The personified “gods” of language live outside of the spatial constraints of man – constraints, as seen above, that often lead to his death – but can only do so thanks to their parasitic and vampiric control over human bodies. Burroughs thus shows that while language may control us, it is likewise dependent on us – *we* are in the true position of power. By rejecting our mortality, that is, our enslavement to the “death” category (and, by the same token, the death view of the post-nuclear world), we deny the immortality of the control society; *The Western Lands* will see this journey fully realized.

Into this scene thus enters the previously introduced Inspector J. Lee, now a full-fledged member of the Nova Police and a clear representative of (or stand-in for) Burroughs himself, summoned to properly deal with the now manifested Nova Mob. Lee outlines the criminals’ technique for achieving nova, “the conflicts that lead to the explosion of a planet” (i.e. supernova, the explosive destruction of the planet, which is a clear reference to the potential nuclear demise that was so feared during the time of Burroughs’s writing), on the worlds they target (*Ticket 55*). The nova technique, on its most basic level, aims to “create as many insoluble conflicts as possible and always aggravate existing conflicts – This is done by dumping on the same planet life forms with incompatible conditions of existence” (*Ticket 55*). The Nova Mob seek to enhance and

aggravate the concept of difference (or *separation*) that is so fundamental to the control society, as has been shown. Of course, the differing life forms of the planet, such as American and Japanese people (who at the time, as shown above, were depicted and approached in strongly non- or subhuman terms by the American population), are not inherently opposed, as we might think, for “[t]here is nothing ‘wrong’ about any given life form since ‘wrong’ only has reference to conflicts with other life forms” (*Ticket 55*). The idea that there can be “wrong” (or, by the same token, “right”) versions of life is formed by language. Burroughs would have us realize the arbitrariness of these distinctions and our essential connection to all forms of life, abandoning our established life definitions, which will always inherently exclude other possible forms of life as “unnatural” (Africans, Japanese, homosexuals, machines, etc.) and thus be “incompatible in present time form,” yet the Nova Mob of *The Ticket That Exploded* acts in opposition, seeking that our differences “remain in present time form,” allowing for the global manipulation of the control society which “feeds back nuclear war and nova” (*Ticket 55*). Here Burroughs again *explicitly* ties his villainous controllers to nuclear weaponry while also depicting nuclear war as an outgrowth of essentialist life definitions. Further, the fact that “nova criminals are not three-dimensional organisms...but they need three-dimensional human agents to operate” and that “the criminal controllers operate in very much the same manner as a virus” makes it undeniably clear that the Nova Mob, bringers of nuclear war, *are* the word virus. Quite literally, language *is* the ticket that exploded.

The Reality Studio in *The Place of Dead Roads* and *The Western Lands*

Burroughs thus provides the backdrop for a reading of the atomic bomb that permeates his later novels *The Place of Dead Roads* and, especially, *The Western Lands*. In them, Burroughs will expand on Pynchon's theory of "individual death" by showing that the death of the individual as an event occurred long before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; its origins are traced back as far as Ancient Egypt and even further to the origins of the word virus itself. His solution, this blasting of a *whole* in the linguistic sphere that (traps and) contains us, paradoxically restores the individual by demonstrating his or her connection to all things. He will dare to propose a positive reading of the horrific bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in which these events, while terrible, teach us just how connected everything is.

That which creates the separations within the whole is ultimately a matter of categorization, a habit based on a need for terms and narratives that is purely lingual. The word virus, in order to function, must reduce something that is strictly irreducible into individual subjects and objects, which results in categories like "life" which seem essential but are, of course – as Saussure and Nietzsche would concur – arbitrary and never quite true or correct. For example, it seems an essential thing that I, the writer, am a unique existence irrevocably distinct from you, the reader, but ultimately my and your "I"s (the most potent aspect of the word virus) are resting on rather shaky foundations: a physical body that, in a handful of years, consists of entirely new cells; a memory that is easily distorted, forgotten, manipulated and reconstructed; a personal self-consciousness or self-conception that feels entirely different and distinct from its ten years past form. Any one thing connecting that which we call "me" with true philosophical force, beyond social and linguistic convention, remains elusive. Burroughs thus might seem on a mission to kill the individual himself, the same goal as Pynchon's version of the control society, if his

philosophy so leads us towards recognizing the arbitrariness of individualization, yet the process of rendering the individual arbitrary also lends great power to the individual, paradoxically. Without any inherent meaning, the individual can rebirth itself under its own rules, resisting the rhetoric of death that has previously been imposed upon it by the control society. Thus Burroughs, in *The Western Lands*, depicts a pilgrimage beyond death and towards immortality, providing an ultimate vision that verges on utopia, a post-nuclear world that is truly *post*-nuclear, that is, a world which, while not abandoning language, has recognized its status as a tool and learned to resist its fundamentalist tendencies, such as a strict, essentialist definition of life in which Japanese people do not “count” as alive, making their extinction, regardless of the technological means, an acceptable endgame. If we are to journey beyond death, to the Western Lands, we must abandon the idea that we know what life is at all and recognize that it may contain much wilder beings than we might imagine, even a machine, even a dead man.

The groundwork for *The Western Lands*, however, is first laid in Burroughs’s 1983 novel *The Place of Dead Roads*, in which Burroughs, appropriately, returns to the nostalgic locale of the Old West, just as the traditional post-apocalyptic tales, *The Day After* (also in 1983) and *Fallout 3* (in 2008), do. Burroughs’s use of this setting, however, does not reflect a romanticization or fetishization of human extinction. Burroughs, rather, returns to the Old West for its liberating qualities; before industrialization, postmodernization, and globalization, it was a place in which one man, usually a subversive, antisocial, countercultural figure (i.e. the kind Burroughs has traditionally sympathized with and lionized), could truly make a difference – at least we like to remember it that way. In the novel’s preamble, Burroughs recalls this nostalgia by explaining the book’s original title, *The Johnson Family*, writing, “‘The Johnson family’ was a turn-of-the-century expression to designate good bums and thieves... a code of conduct” (*Place*).

Burroughs thus longs for an idealized past when criminals possessed a now lost sense of honor (a charge found frequently in other works of American art, from *The Godfather* to *The Dark Knight*, to the point where we might question whether or not such a past ever actually existed, but regardless of this point, such a past serves as a model for Burroughs's very real response to the word and nuclear viruses).

Throughout Burroughs's writings one detects a certain privileging of space over time, which is viewed as a pure construction. The Old West, with its open settings and lack of rigid societal structure, thus seems the perfect model for a space-based future to Burroughs, who continues his preamble by stating that "[t]he only thing that could unite the planet is a united space program... The planetary space station will give all participants an opportunity to function" (*Place*). *The Place of Dead Roads* will attempt to actualize such a world, one in which "all participants" are truly welcome, and in doing so calls for an expansion to the rigid life definitions that seem at the core of nuclear discourse (importantly one of the key players in this actualization, Joe the Dead, which is not just a cute nickname, persists in spite of an actual death in a form closer to machine than man, representing the concept of machine life, a challenge to those life definitions more radical than any national or racial boundary). Burroughs seems potentially skeptical of a harmonious joining of disparate forms of life in the sense we might think (read: the disparate groups of society joining hands and singing around a campfire), however, given Inspector Lee's assertion in *The Ticket That Exploded* that our planet is populated by "life forms with incompatible conditions of existence" (55). Burroughs's precise position in Lee's statement could be debated with great nuance, but either way his proposed solution is clear: creating enough space so that everyone has "an opportunity to function" and making the achievement of this into a unifying principle. When paired with an abandonment (or at least a demotion) of the external, constructed

time, space might approach infinity, true and unadulterated.

The character who will helm the quest towards space and beyond death (death being intrinsically related to time and ultimately its byproduct), Kim Carsons, stands as a unique, and quintessentially Burroughsian, sort of post-apocalyptic hero. The traditional post-apocalyptic hero, such as the father in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, is as much a *remnant* of his time and culture as the dilapidated skyscrapers and abandoned streets which surround him; he is a last man standing, attempting to keep his particular and accepted definition of life (that is, *human life*) preserved in a world that no longer makes sense to him, as McCarthy's unnamed father stands as the last bastion for such exalted human qualities as devotion to one's children (the means through which life and life definitions are continued and spread), in opposition to a world of cannibals and slavers which has completely abandoned its principles. The post-apocalyptic hero is not *designed* for the world he now inhabits, but he perseveres *in spite of* his environment. Kim Carsons, meanwhile, is quite well suited for such an environment and for a role as a rebellious, anti-viral figure, as opposed to a mere remnant struggling for only survival. As an Old West-style shootist, Kim is particularly adapted towards the post-apocalyptic desert world he will journey through to reach the Western Lands in the novel of the same name. He is likewise particularly adapted towards undermining language, strict categories, and the hegemony of the dominant American culture that Burroughs relates to the control society. Kim is a man of slippery and bending identity; the moment we are introduced to him, in the newspaper article that chronicles his death, it is not even as Kim Carsons, but as "William Seward Hall, sixty-five, a real-estate speculator," a man who "wrote western stories under the pen name of 'Kim Carsons'" (*Place* 3). What first seems to be a simple matter of a pseudonym, of course, proves much more complicated over the course of *The Place of Dead Roads* and *The Western Lands*, in which Kim is shown to exist in many bodies,

under many names, in many different times, with no real attempt given by Burroughs to explain these overlapping existences chronologically (e.g. Kim's story begins in the Old West, continues into a science fiction future following Kim's "death," and culminates thousands of years earlier in Ancient Egypt, alongside 11th century figure Hassan i. Sabbah). Kim thus seems to exist outside of strict identity and time itself, making him an ideal figure for subverting the word virus and the control society. Kim's possession of unessential identities and his ability to so bend them can be ascribed to his status as a writer, William Seward Hall, who we are clearly meant to relate to Burroughs himself (whose middle initial stands for Seward). Kim, Hall, and even Inspector Lee of *The Ticket That Exploded* thus all seem to connect with and reflect each other as aspects of the same identity, ultimately to Burroughs himself, who as a writer is able to use language, that which ascribes identity to him, against itself, gifting himself with a plethora of identities. This identity-bending quality is itself an aspect of Kim's larger social deviance, most apparent in his promiscuous and unapologetic homosexuality, but also in his status as a roaming criminal, free of societal obligations and responsibilities, and an artist. Kim thus seems a horrible choice for a post-apocalyptic hero; he does not represent fading human virtue particularly well (at least as it would be understood by the central culture he subverts) and is, indeed, no survivor at all, in the sense of avoiding a physical death: from the moment we are introduced to Kim we already know he is going to die. Kim's death, however, will prove to be the ultimate liberation which allows him to journey *beyond death* and towards the immortality of the Western Lands.

Of course, the dream for a spatial, non-temporal world to counteract the post-apocalyptic is much more than a mere physical journey or "change of locale," and Kim and Burroughs thus recognize the need for "basic *biologic* alterations, like the switch from water to land. There has to be the air-breathing potential *first*. And what is the medium corresponding to air that we must learn

to breath in? The answer came to Kim in a silver flash. . . . *Silence*” (*Place* 40). This is a similar realization to the one made by the District Supervisor in *The Ticket That Exploded*; that is, if we are to properly move beyond the control society, and the nuclear issues that it has created (a connection *Ticket* made clear), we must achieve true silence, the seemingly impossible, and move beyond language. Only then can our life definitions truly change, can we “evolve” into beings not dependent on the word virus. Such an evolution would lead, Burroughs suggests, to true immorality, something “Kim considers... the only goal worth striving for,” but finds absent from Christianity and other religions, particularly the Ancient Egyptians, whose immorality discourses are “arbitrary, precarious, and bureaucratic” (*Place* 42-43).

The Egyptians thought they had achieved immortality, at least that those rich enough to have themselves mummified had, but “your continued immortality in the Western Lands was entirely dependent on the continued existence of your mummy” (*Place* 43). The Egyptians fail to achieve true immorality in Kim/Burroughs’s eyes, thus, because a true immorality would have abandoned such viral ideas as an inherent and necessary connection to the physical body. Burroughs, writing, “your mummy isn’t even safe in a museum. *Air-raid sirens, it’s the blitz!*” notes how easily the physical remnant is destroyed (*Place* 44). Particularly in world of nuclear weapons and incendiary bombs, it seems we should be seeking to move *beyond* our physical ties, which might be atomized at any moment. The Egyptians’ immortality is intrinsically tied to the physical world and thus very weak, easily subverted by grave robbers and time, which will ultimately wins out over even the most effective of preservation methods. Burroughs’s plan for a united space program necessarily calls for the abandonment of all ties, particularly the Egyptians’ dependence on the barren, mummified carcass. Burroughs is not merely critiquing the Egyptian system, however, for we shall see that his ultimate culprit, on whom he squarely pins the blame for

the nuclear problem, is one god essentialism in any and all forms, particularly Western Christianity.

Burroughs introduces his own version of J. Robert Oppenheimer as a twisted, film screen villain, a “director” persona representing the death view, the control society, and the one god essentialism that Burroughs brands as the ultimate nuclear culprit. Oppenheimer’s introduction is prefaced with meditation on mortality that strikes a particularly nuclear chord. Burroughs relates Kim’s viewing of a photograph of his friend Tom’s, writing, “the Indians and the one white are all related, by location: the end of the line. Like the last Tasmanians, the Patagonians, the hairy Ainu, the passenger pigeon, they cast no shadow, because there will never be any more. This picture is the end. The mold is broken” (*Place* 87). There is a post-nuclear mindset to these thoughts in general, for they contemplate the extinction of past species and people, and thus the capacity for human extinction – always a possibility (usually through invocation [or solicitation] of divine forces), but certainly of particular note in the post-nuclear world, in which instant and total annihilation based on nothing but mere human folly is a constant threat. The moment seems to be even more specifically nuclear, however, if we focus on the words, “they cast no shadow, because there will never be any more.” This line recalls the famously eerie and terrifying shadows of Hiroshima, spots where incinerated victims left shadow-esque marks on the steps and sides of buildings as the sole, vague marks of their existence. These victims do not cast any shadow for they have been obliterated to a point of *becoming* their shadows, mere simulacrum in a twisted version of Plato’s cave. Any attempt to immortalize or commemorate the victims of Hiroshima, the Patagonians, or the passenger pigeons is in vain, for Burroughs continues, “This final desolate knowledge impelled them to place phalluses... on male graves. The markers are scattered and broken. Only the picture remains” (*Place* 88). The *shadows* are all that remains; any tangible

object we might hold onto as proof of their existence is gone, exposing the irrelevance of the ideological attachment to the body as a means of immortality.

Burroughs quickly confirms the suspicion that this passage is to be read in nuclear terms when he writes, “Spelling out . . . August 6, 1945: Hiroshima. Oppenheimer on screen: ‘We have become Death, Destroyer of Worlds,’” *literally* spelling out his own metaphors for us, plainly stating what was previously only implied. Having brought on this sense of atomic doom, Oppenheimer appears as Burroughs’s arch nemesis, declaring that not just he, but *we*, have become death, imposing the previously discussed death view upon us (*Place* 88). Appropriately, he does not appear to us directly, but rather as a projected image on a screen. This mimics the power and nature of the bomb itself, which, with the exception of tests like Trinity and Bikini Atoll, cannot be witnessed by anyone who would actually survive it outside of the film medium. Rather, the bomb is transmitted to us through the photographs of its devastation on Japan and the films of the mushroom cloud (as perhaps definitively, if ironically, captured in the ending sequence of *Dr. Strangelove*). When the atomic vision cuts out, Kim notes that “[h]e is looking forward to moving film,” suggesting Burroughs has plans for its appropriation just as he did with language, so we might look back to *The Ticket That Exploded* for Burroughs’s advice on how to handle the film form (*Place* 88).

Further into *The Ticket That Exploded* than was previously examined, Burroughs presents his conception of the word virus, the control society, and the post-nuclear death view mentality as a “reality studio,” i.e. in particularly cinematic vocabulary. Reality-as-film is depicted as ultimately worthless, a series of signifiers without any signified to lend them positive content; “[t]he film stock issued now isn’t worth the celluloid its [*sic*] printed on. There is nothing to back it up. The film bank is empty” (*Ticket* 151). However, just as the arbitrariness of Saussurean

linguistics makes language *more* difficult to change (i.e. if there is no reason to call a tree-in-itself by the signifier “tree” than there is no argument for why we should call it something else; the status quo is simply more convenient), the emptiness of the reality studio (which we might read as language itself anyway, though it also encompasses the control society and the particularly visual nature of the bomb more directly than the word virus concept does by itself) makes resistance that much more difficult, for in order to prevent the disclosure of that emptiness, the reality studio will resort to any and all means to prevent the creation of alternative realities (e.g. an expansion of or challenge to life definitions, as Burroughs will introduce): “The full weight of the film is directed against anyone who calls the film in question with particular attention to writers and artists. Work for the reality studio or else. Or else you will find out how it feels to be *outside the film*. I mean literally without film left to get yourself from here to the corner” (*Ticket* 151). It is clear we are supposed to be equating film with the control society and the bomb (Burroughs, throughout *The Ticket That Exploded*, describes explosions as “burst[s] of nitrous film smoke” and similar language), but also with language and the basic organizing structures of our understanding of the universe (104). Thus, the threat of a life outside of the reality studio, a life essentially without structure, is a terrifying one. We must recall, however, that escaping the essentialist constraints of the reality studio is exactly what Burroughs is calling for us to do. The threat of control society is more than null and void, it is welcomed.

Burroughs makes his plans for the reality studio even more clear when he depicts the studio’s destruction at the hands of a character named Ali, who reemerges during the latter parts of *The Western Lands* (possibly as one of Kim Carsons’s many personas). Burroughs describes the scene as such:

Yes, you have a doorway – Ali blew the smoke and waved his hands
– “Abracadabra” – distant events in green neon – you the smoke...

old mirror bent over a chair... luminous grey flakes falling...
Impressions suddenly collapse to a heap... Film set goes up in red
nitrous smoke – Remember show price? Know who I am? Yes
talking to you board members . . I don't talk often and I don't talk
long . . You smell Hiroshima? (*Ticket 155*)

Burroughs laces the scene with magical imagery: smoke and mirrors, sleight of hand, and the magic word “Abracadabra.” Ali thus seems to destroy the reality studio through an act of magic, beyond the capacity of Burroughs’s audience, but Ali’s magic words are ultimately just words, ones that have been endowed with particular meaning by society; he creates a “doorway” out of the reality studio and leaves its remnants aflame through the power of linguistic play – the same variety of linguistic play that defines Burroughs’s writing style. Appropriately, the burning film stock gives off the stench of Hiroshima, for within the studio’s reels lie the prior thought formations that restrict human discourse and language, resulting in the nuclear catastrophe, just as the Nova Mob had planned. Their success is denied, however, by the *destruction* of the films – not the bombs themselves or the individuals behind them. The bomb’s power lies in the films of the bomb, in its image; there is no difference between the signified and the signifier. Burroughs thus makes it clear that the confusing, inscrutable nature of his novels are not merely cases of playful subversion and literary tricksterism: it is a true call for downright destruction, countering the destructive force of the bomb with an equally destructive force aimed at the *prior thought formations*. *The Western Lands* will aid in this by identifying the thought formations that need to be destroyed and providing an image of life outside of the reality studio.

The thought formations that need to be destroyed are, of course, the restrictive life definitions of the control society, and their ultimate source, one god essentialism, or the One God Universe, to use Burroughs’s terminology. Appropriately, J. Robert Oppenheimer (or at least his projected image) is presented as the ultimate culprit behind the One God Universe, reflecting its

relation to the nuclear issue, alongside the Venusians that pervade the entire Burroughs corpus, but Oppenheimer and the other villainous figures are ultimately a stand-in for or representative of the issue rather than its originators. The Venusian invasion, which represented the control society in *The Ticket That Exploded*, is revealed in *The Western Lands* to be even more nefarious: “The Venusian invasion is a takeover of the souls” (*Western* 6). Oppenheimer provides their ultimate weapon, the atom bomb, which Burroughs reveals secretly functions as “a Soul Killer, to alleviate an escalating soul glut” (*Western* 7). Burroughs’s understanding of the soul is much more complex than a traditional Western/Christian perspective, however, in which a soul would be seen as a single, irreducible being. Burroughs utilizes an Egyptian model (gleaned from Norman Mailer’s *Ancient Evenings*) in which the soul actually consists of seven souls which can separate from each other and die independent deaths. The concept of death in general is thus much more murky under such a system, for various of the seven souls can be dead while others are still alive. The first three souls, which are eternal and merely transfer to new vessels upon death, consist of Ren, the “Director. He directs the film of your life from conception to death;” Sekem, “Energy Power, Light,” described as a Technician; and Khu, the Guardian Angel (*Western* 4). The remaining souls are Ba, the Heart; Ka, the Double and “only reliable guided through the Land of the Dead to the Western Lands;” Khaibit, the Shadow or Memory; and Sekhu, the Remains (*Western* 5).

Shortly after outlining the Egyptian souls, Oppenheimer is introduced for the first time in *The Western Lands*, again through a screen, as in *The Place of Dead Roads*. It is clear from the passage that follows that Oppenheimer is meant to be interpreted in terms of the Egyptian soul system:

Ruins of Hiroshima on screen. Pull back to show the Technician at a switchboard. Behind him, Robert Oppenheimer flanked by three middle-aged men in dark suits, with the cold dead look of heavy power.

The Technician twiddles his knobs. He gives the O.K. sign.
“All clear.”
“Are you sure?”
The Technician shrugs. “The instruments say so.”
Oppy says: “Thank God it wasn’t a dud.”
“Oh, uh, hurry with those printouts, Joe.”
“Yes, sir.” He looked after them sourly, thinking: Thank *Joe*
it wasn’t a dud. God doesn’t know what buttons to push.” (*Western* 8)

Oppenheimer is the ultimate man in control of the nuclear operation – he is even compared to God – but he “doesn’t know what buttons to push.” He is completely reliant on a Technician to realize his aims and vision. The capitalization of Technician makes it clear that this Joe figure it meant to represent the Sekem aspect of the soul, the aspect which actually gets things done. Oppenheimer then is clearly in the position of the Director or Ren, appropriate given his official title at Los Alamos, scientific director, and the cinematic connotations he is always paired with. Oppenheimer may be seen as the Ren aspect of the soul that is the entire novel’s universe. He is the nefarious figure directing all the action from behind a screen without directly participating. He lacks the capacity for creation and can only achieve his power through the manipulation of already existing control systems. This seems a somewhat exaggeratedly Machiavellian position for a man who, in spite of his fame and his folly, was but one of many cogs in the machine that produced Little Boy and Fat Man and dropped them on Japan. However, this is not Oppenheimer the man, it is Oppenheimer the idea, as human incarnate of the atomic, the man who became larger than life, a destroy of worlds, an avatar for that entire horrible machine. In spite of his power he is at the mercy of his Technician Joe, clearly Joe the Dead, a machine life character who, along with Kim Carsons, will help to undermine the control society in *The Western Lands*. Ultimately, however, Oppenheimer is a stand-in for something much bigger than the nuclear bomb or the control society; he personifies the One God Universe (which Burroughs, and thus myself, will abbreviate

OGU) and moreover *God Himself*.

The ultimate culprit or villain behind *The Western Lands* and thus the entire nuclear age is much more than some exaggerated Oppenheimer figure, it is God. Burroughs will define the prior thought formations, the *films*, that have to be destroyed to liberate humanity as those espousing the OGU, which seems predominantly Christian but also encapsulates Islam and presumably all monotheistic religions. The Venusian conspiracy, of which Oppenheimer is a chief architect (given the Venusians' plans basis in nuclear weapons or "Soul Killers") is described as "antimagical, authoritarian, dogmatic... The universe they are imposing is controlled, predictable, dead," combining the traditional control discourse with particularly religious terminology like "antimagical" and "dogmatic" (*Western* 59). However, the One God is quickly exposed in much more direct fashion, Burroughs claiming he, "backed by secular power, is forced on the masses in the name of Islam, Christianity, the State, for all secular leaders want to be the One. To be intelligent or observant under such a blanket of oppression is to be 'subversive'" (*Western* 111). Burroughs thus clearly positions the One God at the head of his control society while simultaneously positioning himself as the enlightened writer and observer who can subvert that control. Burroughs continues by identifying the One God directly with time, which is of course in direct opposition to Burroughs's space-based ideals, writing, "The One God is *Time*. And in Time, any being that is spontaneous and alive will wither and die like an old joke" (*Western* 111). If we are to realize Burroughs's vision, it is clear the One God, Time, and Oppenheimer all have to go.

Oppenheimer's allegiance to the OGU makes sense, given his famous misreading of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, in which he confuses Krishna and Vishnu, reflective of a man from a culture doused in one god essentialism (the death view is thus entirely based in this anti-Burroughsian mindset, as is the use of nuclear bombs in the first place, as Oppenheimer's misreading serves as

his justification for his actions). Oppenheimer is far more than just an ally to the OGU, though: he is a personification of God himself. In a strange way, Burroughs ties the nuclear bomb, the first non-divine means of apocalypse, back to divinity, though not in any traditional sense. The evidence for Oppenheimer-as-God is circumstantial but powerful, and it illuminates the nature of Burroughs's text in fascinating ways. Burroughs describes the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as "an obvious lie... a shameless swindler," casting him in a similar light to the pathetic and manipulative Oppenheimer simulacrum (*Western* 70). Burroughs continues, "does this Christian God stand with his worshippers? He does not. Like a cowardly officer, he keeps himself well out of the war zone, bathed in the sniveling prayers of his groveling, shit-eating worshippers – his dogs" (*Western* 70). Burroughs paints his One God with the same exact imagery with which he paints his Director Oppenheimer. Both hover outside of wars they themselves created, unwilling to put themselves in harm's way. As Oppenheimer's immortality is guaranteed, being a Ren soul, so is the One God's, both perfectly content to utilize the lesser moral souls for their experiments and battles. Both act as commanding officers, not directly involving themselves in their work, and both are ultimately being blamed for the same things: nuclear warfare, linguistic imprisonment, and flawed immortality. Like Oppenheimer, the One God, in spite of all of his power, does not know what buttons to push, "Because He can do everything, He can do nothing, since the act of doing demands opposition... He can't go anywhere, since He is already fucking everywhere, like cowshit in Calcutta" (*Western* 113). In fact, this reveals that when Burroughs wrote, "God doesn't know what buttons to push," he was not merely reflecting the Technician's attitude towards his superior but, rather, hiding the correlation in plain sight. The most direct correlation is found in their ultimate nature as film in the Burroughsian reality studio, however. The fact that Oppenheimer only ever appears on screen suggests he himself is nothing but a recording, a film, and if

Oppenheimer is a stand-in for God, this would imply that Burroughs is claiming that God is just another recording to be discarded. We do not need to rely on this supposition because Burroughs provides us with a direct proclamation of this fact, and it is perhaps the most damning evidence that we should be reading Oppenheimer and One God as a single entity: “The OGU is a pre-recorded universe of which He is the recorder” (*Western* 113). The film is not simply God’s *message*, but God is the medium for the film, for the recorded universe, itself. The barrier between signifier and signified once again collapses. Thus, the prior thought formations Burroughs calls for us to destroy, and shows Ali destroying in *The Ticket That Exploded*, are not merely ideas of language, of essentialism, of monotheism and restrictive life definitions; the red nitrous smoke smelling of Hiroshima is the stench of the One God Himself being burned. *The Ticket That Exploded* is a how-to manual for the destruction of the One God Universe, and *The Western Lands* is its fruition.

We Are Beyond Death: The Journey Towards the Western Lands

The now clear mission of *The Western Lands* is realized through a series of complex, and not necessarily commensurable, plots. The mission begins with the united space program first conceived of by Kim Carsons in the pages of *The Place of Dead Roads*, which is foiled by the intervention of Joe the Dead, who is revealed to be Kim’s murderer (in the shootout described at the beginning and end of *The Place of Dead Roads*). I will use this intervention as an opportunity to examine the ways in which Joe the Dead, as an example of machine life, helps to undermine the restrictive life definitions that are core to OGU and nuclear discourse, as has been discussed throughout this work. Finally, *The Western Lands* culminates in Kim’s pilgrimage towards the novel’s titular locale, representing the destruction of prior thought formations, leading to

ambiguous results, as Kim, transubstantiated into an old writer character who clearly represents Burroughs himself, completes his mission to unclear ends. I will argue for an optimistic and empowering reading of this ending, one that affirms the reader to take the same pilgrimage *beyond death*, to a truly *post*-nuclear world, not the one which gave birth to the bomb that we have erroneously dubbed with the name.

We are reintroduced to Kim's planned space program fairly early in *The Western Lands*; it is conceived as "a secret service without a country" called Margaras Unlimited or MU (an acronym which Burroughs also uses for Magical Universe, his term for a universe of many gods in opposition to the OGU) (*Western* 24). By blackmailing Interpol, MU is able to gain access to the wealth of files and information possessed by the world's intelligence organizations, a literal co-opting of the control society, iconically represented throughout literary history as an alphabet soup of shady organizations, towards Burroughsian, space-based ends. Kim and MU state, "Our policy is SPACE. Anything that favors or enhances space programs, space exploration, simulation of space conditions, exploration of inner space, expanding awareness, we will support" (*Western* 25). Such rhetoric continues directly from where Burroughs and Kim left off in the previous novel, seeking to abandon time for space whilst saving and unifying humanity. Unfortunately, the space program is derailed before it even gets off the ground, for on the very next page of the novel, the first of its second chapter, Burroughs returns us to the scene of Kim's murder, revealing Joe the Dead, Kim's once ally, as the killer. Kim's death was not merely an unfortunate incident, however, and Burroughs will demonstrate that his death was actually profoundly necessary in order for the space program to succeed.

First, the novel shifts its focus to the character of Joe the Dead, who, while not engaging in the same pilgrimage as Kim/Neferti/the old writer/Burroughs, subverts the dominant structures of

the OGU in interesting ways due to his status as a half-machine/half-man hybrid, who uses his particular abilities and knowledge to defy death in ways that frustrate the control society.

Burroughs describes Joe in terms that are decidedly robotic and inhuman, writing that “[h]e feels [grief] in the plates in his skull, in his artificial arms, in his artificial eye, in every wire and circuit of the tiny computer chips, down into his atoms and photons” (*Western* 40). Burroughs’s description focuses on Joe’s artificiality almost to the point of absurdity: the nouns are all either electronic components or described with the adjective “artificial” directly, and this artificiality is stated to exist as such down to the atomic level, in such a way that any hope for “life” within Joe’s machine seems impossible. However, everything about Burroughs’s intentionally mechanistic *description* of Joe the Dead is undone in his characterization, his possession of a grief so deep it pervades every wire, chip, and proton of his existence. This juxtaposition of the natural and the mechanistic is unsettling, but it makes it clear that, for Burroughs, Joe the Dead is an example of *machine life*, in the long tradition of such speculations in science-fiction history.

Burroughs further characterizes Joe in terms of his Egyptian soul system. When Burroughs writes that, “Joe is the Tinkerer, the Smith, the Masters of Keys and Locks, of Time and Fire, the Master of Light and Sound, the Technician,” he obviously identifies Joe with the Sekem, the second soul, directly underneath the Ren (*Western* 28). The Sekem is the soul that knows how to push the buttons, and we might recall that Oppenheimer’s Technician is referred to as Joe. Joe is formally subservient to Oppenheimer/Ren/One God, but in practice subverts him. Joe the Dead is described as a member of “a select breed of outlaws known as the NOs, natural outlaws dedicated to breaking the so-called natural laws of the universe foisted upon us by physicists, chemists, mathematicians, biologists and, above all, the monumental fraud of cause and effect, to be replaced by the more pregnant concept of synchronicity” (*Western* 30). Joe’s entire existence is

based around undermining the directions of the Director God, on which the neat order of his One God Universe depends, and his contradictory, category-rejecting nature as an example of machine life makes this inevitable. Joe uses a variety of methods to counteract traditional evolution, breeding, and death by dealing in advanced hybridization, transplant surgery, and even cancer treatment, in which his antagonistic nature to Ren is made explicit, while Ren's connection to the nuclear is further reinforced:

Cancer seems as immutably real and exempt from intervention as a nuclear blast. The explosive replication of cells? Once it starts, it is like an atom bomb that has already detonated. Death is an end product of purpose, of destiny. Something to be done in a certain time, and once it is done there is no point in staying around. Like a bullfight. Destiny = Ren. (*Western* 60)

The connection between the atom bomb and cancer reflects larger connection being made between death in general as a category and the One God Universe. Joe the Dead, as living dead and living machine, undermines the category of death in a way that frustrates the One God's system. He is in many ways doing the work of the Burroughsian revolutionary, breaking down and expanding categories that present themselves as essential.

Joe is not completely sympathetic to the cause of the Burroughsian human rebel, however, given his advocacy of a complete evolution beyond the human race, believing "[t]he human problem cannot be solved in human terms. Only a basic change in the board and the chessmen could offer a chance of survival" (*Western* 27). This idea of being *replaced*, of being rendered *obsolete*, is arguably the true terror behind a post-apocalyptic world, as evidenced by more recent post-apocalyptic works of art moving away from the traditional "last humans standing" plots of works like *The Day After* or Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* and towards the machine-dominated, and by no means less apocalyptic and nuclear, futures of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of*

Electric Sheep? and films like *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and even *The Matrix*. Joe the Dead presents a reading of “we are become death” that equates to the birth of the machine. In our attempts to maintain primacy over the definition of life, we are actually part of a long tradition that Burroughs traces back to the Egyptians. Joe the Dead challenges the idea that there can be one type of life in the same way that Burroughs challenges the idea that there can be one type of god. Joe’s character suggests an entire reading of post-nuclear, machine-based art, particularly film, through the Burroughsian lens. Such a project is beyond the limits of this work, but the first of the three codas which follow the work proper will suggest a potential schema for a reading of Burroughsian machine life in atomic cinema.

Kim Carsons reenters the scene of *The Western Lands* as a dead man summoned by, of all people, the District Supervisor whom was encountered in *The Ticket That Exploded*, the man whom first prescribed the miracle of silence as the cure for the Venusian invasion which has clearly taken on new life in the Red Night Trilogy. Provocatively, upon seeing the District Supervisor, Kim is incredulous, recalling his shared identity with Burroughs himself, as previously described, in asking, “So how come I’m not the Supervisor? After all, I *wrote* the Supervisor,” but the D.S. himself clarifies that Kim, like all writers, does not actually write, but merely reads and transcribes the already written, that which Kim “reads” is conveyed through his “spokesman, the Supervisor. The Imam. The Old Man” (Western 74). This Old Man is the Old Man in the Mountain, more commonly referred to as Hassan i. Sabbah (commonly abbreviated as HIS by Burroughs), the Islamic assassin figure who will accompany Kim, who at this point will be mostly seen under the Neferti identity, on his soon to be ordered pilgrimage. The D.S.’s dialogue, however, suggest HIS is to be identified with both Kim and Burroughs themselves, and thus the “old writer” figure who appears at the novel’s bookends. Burroughs’s insistence on not merely

changing his and his character's identities at will, but in splitting a single identity across several simultaneously existences of ambiguous relation, suggests the true commitment to a non-essential, non-lingual, silent world that must be made in order to make it to the Western Lands. Any man who is arrogant enough to assume his entire personage is a single, irreducible being is doomed for disappointment and failure.

Regardless, the D.S. informs Kim of his mission to find the Western Lands. Appropriately this is an act of a character from *The Ticket That Exploded*, which I have argued is a "manual" for Burroughsian methodology, instructing a character in *The Western Lands* to act the theory out in practice. Kim's mission for a unified space program is thus sidelined because first death has to be over come via the discovery of the Western Lands and the immorality that lies within them. We might thus consider back to Kim's first plans for the space program in *The Place of Dead Roads*, when he noted the need for certain biologic alterations before the program could be enacted successfully. It thus seems clear that the pilgrimage *is* the biologic alteration in question, and there is a reason the space program had to be so quickly interrupted by Kim's death. Joe the Dead, seemingly taking a villainous and traitorous action (and he is, of course, by no means a fully redeemable character), actually helps to fulfill Kim's and the D.S.'s plans, for they now know that the answer much come from silence, from a land beyond death. Only when the pilgrimage to the Western Lands has been made can the space program be a viable option.

The novel thus chronicles Burroughs's various self-extensions of Kim Carsons, Hassan i. Sabbah, and Neferti journeying though the profoundly strange, mystical, and polytheistic world of the Land of the Dead towards the Western Lands. The details of this journey, from the presence of gigantic, radiated centipedes to nuclear bomb jet packs, are laden with various potential metaphorical significances, but a full analysis of such details is not of chief interest to us here and

ultimately critically superfluous: the point is that the pilgrimage is made. Thus, a brief overview will suffice for my purposes. The characters journey through Waghdas, City of Knowledge, a particularly post-apocalyptic city, adorned with “stick people frozen on the wall, like the shadows of human figures left on the walls of Hiroshima” (*Western* 129). Waghdas is a city of not just knowledge, but nuclear knowledge, and all of its knowledge must be abandoned if the pilgrimage is to be successful. The pilgrims thus proceed to the town of Last Chance, a town of duelists, some who “ride in with atomic bullets” to “take out the target and immediate environs like a saloon or half a hotel” (*Western* 142). Such tactics are dishonorable by the code of the Old West which Kim Carsons stands as a remnant of. In opposition to this atomic weaponry, Kim engages in his duel with the character Zed with handguns, which he only uses after Zed misses in an attempt to shoot Kim in the back while he urinates. Kim then, tracking Zed down, approaches him from the front, gives him an opportunity to defend himself and, after Zed misses again, “disintegrates him with one shot that takes out a wall of the store” (*Western* 149). Surrounded by dishonorable tactics and weaponry, Kim Carsons perhaps returns a measure of honor to weaponry (Burroughs, of course, being quite fond of handguns) in an age in which such honor has been lost. Finally, they must pass through the Duad, a river of excrement, for “[t]o transcend life you must transcend the conditions of life, the shit and farts and piss and sweat and snot of life” (*Western* 155). Neferti, noted to have particular trouble with the Duad due to his past experiences with “the deadly poison of Christianity,” finally succeeds in crossing by “dropping his Ego, his Me,” completely eliminating any sense that he is any way truly distinct from those around him, upon which he realizes that “[t]here is nothing here to protect himself from,” and grime of life is none the less as arbitrary as its splendors (*Western* 158).

The pilgrimage is far from an isolated journey, as well. Burroughs describes leagues of

“awakened pilgrims,” finding “[t]he great mushroom-shaped cloud always closer,” that is, attempting to move beyond the pessimistic death view of their post-nuclear existences, “take a step into the unknown, a step as drastic and irretrievable as the transition from water to land. That step is from word into silence. From Time into Space” (*Western* 115). This is the path Burroughs has been laying out for us throughout his corpus, but only now is the mass pilgrimage actually beginning, a successful trip will give “access to the gift that supersedes all other gifts: Immortality,” an immortality free of the lies and trickery of the One God Universe and the physical entanglements of the Egyptians (*Western* 124). Will the pilgrims truly live forever? The answer is a substantive yes but not a literal one. The immortality Burroughs offers is outside of the realm of language and therefore cannot be understood in the normal sense of the term. Death will still occur in the terms of linguistic, categorical death, but the true pilgrimage is the recognition that this death is nothing but a category. Life need not be obsessed with maintaining its own status quo, with maintaining its consciousness in the terms it has come to understand indicate “being alive.” Burroughs’s truths are hard to fathom because we attempt to fathom it linguistically; his pilgrimage truly necessitates that “[o]nly those who can leave behind everything they have ever believed in can hope to escape” (*Western* 116). Doing so provides the ultimate repellent to the restricting and controlling forces of nuclear weaponry, control society, and one god essentialism. Ultimately, it is the practice of Burroughs *himself*, more directly captured in the “old writer” (who, as the last man standing, seems to be the whole which has emerged from the Western Lands following the various characters’ successful entrance) of the novel’s final pages than any of his other personas, moving beyond death and abandoning the prior thought formations he has spent so long calling our attention to. It is a strangely utopian message, breaking through our frameworks of thought to save us.

Burroughs leaves us with the figure of the old writer, seeming to represent a reconstitution of Burroughs himself, who, following the pilgrimage, “couldn’t write anymore because he had reached the end of words, the end of what can be done with words” (*Western* 258). Frederick M. Dolan, in “The Poetics of Postmodern Subversion: The Politics of Writing in William S. Burroughs’s *The Western Lands*,” chooses to read this moment as a meditation on the limits and failures of writing, on Burroughs’s own failure to accurately sublimate the word virus, which Dolan frames as an “Aristotelian construct,” writing:

the problem with the ‘Aristotelian construct,’ fundamentally, is its inaccuracy. ‘Reality’ just *is* synchronous and unpredictable, whereas the declarative sentence moving ahead determinably through time makes it appear as if one event follows another in an orderly manner. Burroughs might attempt to write in ways that undermine the Aristotelian construct, but not without declaring *something*, and finally, as we have seen, not without becoming inveigled in this construct’s seductive images of lucidity, order, control, and a plenitude beyond mere writing as fiction. (549)

I reject Dolan’s reading of this moment, for while Burroughs is required to engage in some level of declaration, this is not in itself a ruination of his linguistic philosophy. Burroughs notes the word virus, not a parasite, originated as a symbiotic relationship. It is a tool for structuring and interpreting reality. Thus, while Burroughs will produce declarations that engage in Dolan’s Aristotelian construct, his hyperconsciousness of language’s arbitrary nature saves him from falling back into the same slumber from which he has attempted to awaken us through the *use* of language. Burroughs’s lament that he has reached the end of words is in fact a joyous cry of success: he has exhausted the word virus’s tricks and reduced it to a symbiont. He has undermined post-nuclear terror, one god essentialism, and the word virus as much as he can *for* us with his words. His job is done. As readers, it is now upon us to move on from language ourselves, to follow Burroughs on his pilgrimage to the Western Lands. If there is a lament at the end of *The*

Western Lands, it is not for Burroughs himself, it is for the reader who might not follow him. Burroughs asks us, “[h]ow long can one hang on in Gibraltar... clinging always to less and less” (*Western* 258). Throughout his entire literary corpus, Burroughs has encouraged us to abandon the prior thought formations that limit our perspective on the world, that allow us to be controlled by language and society, that lead to determinations that a homosexual or a Japanese citizen is not truly alive, yet still many cling to their Gibraltar, the last vestige of a once great Empire of language, God, and bombs. When he, closing the novel, quotes T.S. Eliot, who conceived of a post-apocalyptic wasteland long before J. Robert Oppenheimer made it a terrifyingly possible reality, writing, “Hurry up, please. It’s time,” he does not mean time is running out; rather, Time is running after us. He cautions us to follow him, to move onto the Space of the Western Lands before Time catches us for good.

A Long Way Down: Parting Shots from the End of the World

J. Robert Oppenheimer’s famous words upon witnessing the first nuclear explosion helped convince the world that it had or would profoundly change in a post-nuclear apocalypse in which annihilation would be sudden, absolute, and the work of humanity. Traditional post-apocalyptic works lamented humanity’s lot while simultaneously romanticizing its status as *the last men standing*. Meanwhile, no one seemed to realize the true horrors that had led to the nuclear bomb in the first place: exclusive and limiting definitions of life that viewed the Japanese people as a vermin to be “killed off,” a society that would rather see the candle of life in the universe completely snuffed out than be replaced by life that defied that definition. The post-nuclear world existed *before* the bomb; it *created* the bomb, not the other way around. William S. Burroughs traces the bomb as a discourse to its very basic assumptions, its implicit logics of control,

manipulation, one god essentialism, and viral language. This is the true mark of a nuclear apocalypse, not a headcount of warheads and power plants. Destroying the specific instances of technology does not stop anything if the underlying logic continues. We need to approach the bomb as a discourse, from the bottom up (and the bottom is a long way down), if we are to truly understand it. Ultimately though, humanity tells us less about the bomb than the bomb tells us about humanity.

If nothing else, let this work have taken the normally inaccessible work of William S. Burroughs and shown the complex cultural analyses within. Burroughs shows us that the ultimate culprit behind the bomb is the word virus and the One God Universe, but he also shows us that Burroughs's declaration that we have become death need not be a permanent fate. By moving beyond death, through the Western Lands, we can achieve the immortality that only comes from the recognition of the connection of all things. Even if the literal language of such a statement strikes as too strong, even if everything is not *actually* and *substantively* connected, things are significantly and closely connected, and approaching the world as if the connection is substantial proves to be a useful theoretical framework. Perhaps, though, the nuclear bomb can be the historical moment through which we come to recognize the profound literalness of this connection, the shockwave through which we place ourselves in the moment of impact. Such an admission makes the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki even more horrifying, but it might also prevent such tragedies from happening again.

CODA 1: Nuclear Film and the Fear of Machine Life

The limits of space and time did not allow for a true analysis of nuclear film, particularly as it might be understood through the Burroughsian lens, which lends its propensity for connecting the bomb to other discourses that are not explicitly nuclear, with an eye towards the concept of machine life, a concept that has come to dominate post-apocalyptic film, particularly since the 1990s. Such an analysis would do well to examine the 90s post-apocalyptic action films *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and *The Matrix*. *Terminator 2*'s nuclear connection seems obvious enough, given its subtitle and its explicitly nuclear imagery (e.g. the famous playground scene). Interestingly, however, the object of central interest, and ultimate doom, to the universe of the film is not a nuclear weapon, nor even a battle android, but the computer chip within the wrecked Terminator's arm. The characters desperately attempt to destroy this chip, which sends man on the trajectory towards inventing the chip itself. Even the "good" Terminator himself is chiefly interested in eliminating his own existence. In spite of this, the end of the film, by which point the Terminator has established a strong, fatherly relationship with the boy, paradoxically suggests that an emotional reconciliation between human and machine is possible, that machine life just might be *alive*, while simultaneously doing everything to suggest the technological progress that will destroy mankind is entirely inevitable. The film remains optimistic in the personal moment while famously bleak in its "big picture" narrative, as continued in *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, a film mostly notable for its ending sequence only, unfortunately.

The connections between nuclear devastation and a computer chip in *Terminator 2* do well to set up an analysis of *The Matrix*, which reverts to an almost entirely negative view of machine life (and not a particularly positive one of human life either). Indeed, *The Matrix* depicts a world, darkened by the use of weaponry of a probably nuclear nature, in which all life in the "real world"

is exceedingly bleak. The machines, e.g. Agent Smith, are not content within the Matrix either, suggesting complete ignorance is the only method towards anything resembling happiness. It also suggests a machine life that is, well, not very alive, but just as alive as its pathetic human counterparts, who are not particularly alive themselves in their reliance on literally preprogrammed religious sequences of uprising and sacrifice for anything resembling a purpose. The most pivotal point to be taken from *The Matrix*, however, is its shocking, but profoundly true, equation of the computer (and more specifically the Internet) with the nuclear bomb. The two technologies developed alongside each other, with figures such as Vannevar Bush being central to both, and in the future of *The Matrix* it takes computers, networks, *and* nuclear missiles to build the lethal cocktail that induces the bleak dystopia shared by humans and machines in mutual dissatisfaction. The specific technology means nothing; sometimes it takes a large number of them in a very particular combination, but in the end, *the end* is a discourse.

Finally, such a film analysis might look at *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (known only as *Innocence* in Japan), an anime film proposing an unessentialist view of life, inclusive of human, machine, and hybrid, that strikes as oddly enlightened (appropriate that it would come from Japan) and even Burroughsian. An extensive analysis of the roles of machine life and the nuclear bomb in post-apocalyptic art might look to a great many other works (*Blade Runner* and its source material, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick, come to mind particularly), but this schema might be an interesting and non-traditional starting point for a nuclear film analysis.

CODA 2: The Fukushima I Accidents

As this thesis neared its completion, Japan was hit by the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, triggering various equipment failures and radioactive releases at the Fukushima I Nuclear Power Plant. The news media has subsequently been flooded with debates as to the safety of nuclear power, sensationalist reports of radiation waves crossing the Pacific into the United States, and frequent parallels between the events of Hiroshima and Fukushima. With my thesis of this nature, I feel obligated to acknowledge the Fukushima incident, but only to caution those who seek to draw such parallels to Hiroshima too readily. These are two entirely different historical events happening within entirely different historical frameworks. We do not want the death view to resurface and keep us from helping the many victims of the *natural* disasters due to our fears of nuclear incidents.



A conceptual sketch of a potential installation of "We Are Become Death: Cultural Shockwaves of Hiroshima"

CODA 3: An Experiment in Installing “We Are Become Death”

If any reader should be inspired to display this thesis as an art installation, may they first be welcome to do so. Secondly, may I offer my humble suggestions, which I include here mostly out of a sense of obligation to return Burroughs to the chaos from which he emerged. My explication of his theories above both emboldens and unsettles me. I feel that I have gone into Burroughs’s home and straightened up all of his things without asking, and I have a duty to return the mess the way I found it.

Firstly, having so engaged with the word virus through this piece, I feel it is necessary to let it know who is boss. I recommend two to four large printers set up to be constantly printing the thesis from the first to last page in sequence. The printers will be arranged so that pages, upon their completion, fall into a furnace in the center of them. The thesis proper should be cut-up in Burroughsian style and displayed as a massive tile puzzle, which visitors are strongly encouraged to distort, ensuring surprising and new reading experiences for all. A wall of monitors soundlessly play a variety of nuclear-related clips, each in random sequence: footage of mushroom clouds, scenes from *The Day After*, *The Effects of the Atomic Bombs Against Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, *Terminator 2*, and other nuclear films, and perhaps, occasionally, the entire *Twilight Zone* episode “Time Enough at Last.” Once per day at some time of significance (which I leave to the exhibitors), however, the exhibit goes into shutdown. Air raid sirens wail, introducing J. Robert Oppenheimer, whose head takes over the wall of monitors, now acting as a single screen. He delivers his famous “I am become death” performance as the furnace ignites.

During all times other than Oppenheimer’s guest appearances, the following songs shall play in random sequence in the background of the exhibit:

--- “Rockets Fall on Rocket Falls” by Godspeed You! Black Emperor

--- “Mourning Doves” by The Hourglass Orchestra

- “We Will All Go Together When We Go” by Tom Lehrer
- “The End of the World” by Skeeter Davis
- “In the Year 2525” by Zager & Evans
- “Enola Gay” by Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark
- “I Melt With You” by Modern English
- “We’ll Meet Again” by Vera Lynn

multimedia associated with this project may be viewed at wearebecomedead.tumblr.com

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