

The Invisible Generation

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

William S. Burroughs (1914–1997) was the greatest American literary experimentalist of the late 20th century. He was heir to the fortune generated by his grandfather, inventor of the adding machine, precursor to the modern computer. Yet despite this privileged upbringing, Burroughs was a self-described “junkie” and “queer” (to cite the titles of his first two books) whose career was spent in self-imposed exile from mainstream American society and culture. After graduating from Harvard in 1936, he landed in New York, where he befriended Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and became associated with the “Beat Generation.” Following the publication of his most famous novel, *Naked Lunch* (1959), Burroughs wrote a trilogy of novels using “the cut-up method.” Emulating the techniques of collage in painting and montage in film, Burroughs took a scissors to old and new portions of his writing, and then spliced together the pieces at random to generate new ideas and connections. The technique was not only a tool of literary invention; it was also a response to Burroughs’ view that language is an anonymous force of social control, a mind- and action-controlling virus spread through everyday speech and writing, and most glaringly manifested in the mass media. The cut-up method, then, was a means of subverting, or at least resisting, language’s normalizing power.

Throughout his later life, Burroughs was a cult figure with a particularly strong standing among musicians. The bands Steely Dan and Soft Machine took their names from Burroughs’ novels. Burroughs himself collaborated with Brian Jones (of the Rolling Stones), Ornette Coleman, Laurie Anderson, Psychic TV, the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, among others. The following text (the epilogue to his cut-up novel *The Ticket that Exploded* [1962]), reveals Burroughs as both a founder of “sound poetry” and a precursor to DJ Culture. In cut-up form, it describes Burroughs’ cut-up experiments with tape recorders and reflects upon the profound effects of sound and recording on our daily experience.

what we see is determined to a large extent by what we hear you can verify this proposition by a simple experiment turn off the sound track on your television set and substitute an arbitrary sound track prerecorded on your tape recorder street sounds music conversation recordings of other television programs you will find that the arbitrary sound track seems to be appropriate and is in fact determining your interpretation of the film track on screen people running for a bus in piccadilly with a sound track of machine-gun fire looks like 1917 petrograd you can extend the experiment by using recorded material more or less appropriate to the film track for example take a political speech on television shut off sound track and substitute another speech you have prerecorded hardly tell the difference isn’t much record sound track of one danger man from uncle spy program run it in place of another and see if your friends can’t tell the difference it’s all done with tape recorders consider this machine and what it can do it can record and play back activating a past time set by precise association a recording can be played back any number of times you can study and analyze every pause and inflection of a recorded conversation why did so and so say just that or this just here play back so and so’s recordings and you will find out what cues so and so in you can edit a recorded conversation retaining material which is incisive witty and pertinent you can edit a recorded conversation retaining remarks which are boring flat and silly a tape recorder can play back fast slow or backwards you can learn to do these things record a sentence and speed it up now try imitating your accelerated voice play a sentence backwards and learn to unsay what you just said . . . such exercises bring you a liberation from old association locks try inching tape this sound is produced by taking a recorded text for best results a text spoken in a loud clear voice and rubbing the tape back and forth across the head the same sound can be produced on a philips compact cassette recorder by playing a tape back and switching the mike control stop start on and off at short intervals which gives an effect of stuttering take any text speed it up slow it down run it backwards inch it and you will hear words that were not in the original recording new words made by the machine different people will scan out different words of course but some of the words are quite clearly there and anyone can hear them words which were not in the original tape but which are in many cases relevant to the original text as if the words themselves had been interrogated and forced to reveal their hidden meanings it is interesting to record these words literally made by the machine itself you can carry this experiment further using as your original recording material that contains no words animal noises for instance record a trough of slopping hogs the barking of dogs go to the zoo and record the bellowings of Guy the gorilla the big cats growling over their meat goats and monkeys now run the animals backwards speed up slow down and inch the animals and see if any clear words emerge see what the animals have to say see how the animals react to playback of processed tape

the simplest variety of cut up on tape can be carried out with one machine like this record any text rewind to the beginning now run forward an arbitrary interval stop the machine and record a short text wind forward stop record where you have recorded over the original text the words are wiped out and replaced with new words do this several times creating arbitrary juxtapositions you will notice that

the arbitrary cuts in are appropriate in many cases and your cut up tape makes surprising sense cut up tapes can be hilariously funny twenty years ago i heard a tape called the drunken newscaster prepared by jerry newman of new york cutting up news broadcasts i can not remember the words at this distance but i do remember laughing until i fell out of a chair paul bowles calls the tape recorder god's little toy maybe his last toy fading into the cold spring air poses a colorless question

any number can play

yes any number can play anyone with a tape recorder controlling the sound track can influence and create events the tape recorder experiments described here will show you how this influence can be extended and correlated into the precise operation this is the invisible generation he looks like an advertising executive a college student an american tourist doesn't matter what your cover story is so long as it covers you and leaves you free to act you need a philips compact cassette recorder handy machine for street recording and playback you can carry it under your coat for recording looks like a transistor radio for playback playback in the street will show the influence of your sound track in operation of course the most undetectable playback is street recordings people don't notice yesterday voices phantom car holes in time accidents of past time played back in present time screech of brakes loud honk of an absent horn can occasion an accident here old fires still catch old buildings still fall or take a prerecorded sound track into the street anything you want to put out on the sublim eire play back two minutes record two minutes mixing your message with the street waft your message right into a worthy ear some carriers are much better than others you know the ones lips moving muttering away carry my message all over london in our yellow submarine working with street playback you will see your playback find the appropriate context for example i am playing back some of my dutch schultz last word tapes in the street five alarm fire and a fire truck passes right on cue you will learn to give the cues you will learn to plant events and concepts after analyzing recorded conversations you will learn to steer a conversation where you want it to go the physiological liberation achieved as word lines of controlled association are cut will make you more efficient in reaching your objectives whatever you do you will do it better record your boss and co-workers analyze their associational patterns learn to imitate their voices oh you'll be a popular man around the office but not easy to compete with the usual procedure record their body sounds from concealed mikes the rhythm of breathing the movements of after-lunch intestines the beating of hearts now impose your own body sounds and become the breathing word and the beating heart of that organization become that organization the invisible brothers are invading present time the more people we can get working with tape recorders the more useful experiments and extensions will turn up why not give tape recorder parties every guest arrives with his recorder and tapes of what he intends to say at the party recording what other recorders say to him it is the height of rudeness not to record when addressed directly by another tape recorder and you can't say anything directly have to record it first the coolest old tape worms never talk direct

what was the party like switch on playback
what happened at lunch switch on playback

eyes old unbluffed unreadable he hasn't said a direct word in ten years and as you hear what the party was like and what happened at lunch you will begin to see sharp and clear there was a grey veil between you and what you saw or more often did not see that grey veil was the prerecorded words of a control machine once that veil is removed you will see clearer and sharper than those who are behind the veil whatever you do you will do it better than those behind the veil this is the invisible generation it is the efficient generation hands work and go see some interesting results when several hundred tape recorders turn up at a political rally or a freedom march suppose you record the ugliest snarling southern law men several hundred tape recorders spitting it back and forth and chewing it around like a cow with the aftosa you now have a sound that could make any neighborhood unattractive several hundred tape recorders echoing the readers could touch a poetry reading with unpredictable magic and think what fifty thousand beatle fans armed with tape recorders could do to shea stadium several hundred people recording and playing back in the street is quite a happening right there conservative m.p. spoke about the growing menace posed by bands of irresponsible youths with tape recorders playing back traffic sounds that confuse motorists carrying the insults recorded in some low underground club into mayfair and piccadilly this growing menace to public order put a thousand young recorders with riot recordings into the street that mutter gets louder and louder remember this is a technical operation one step at a time here is an experiment that can be performed by anyone equipped with two machines connected by extension lead so he can record directly from one machine to the other since the experiment may give rise to a marked erotic reaction it is more interesting to select as your partner some one with whom you are on intimate terms we have two subjects b. and j. b. records on tape recorder 1 j. records on tape recorder 2 now we alternate the two voice tracks tape recorder 1 playback two seconds tape recorder 2 records tape recorder 2 playback two seconds tape recorder 1 records alternating the voice of b. with the voice of j. in order to attain any degree of precision the two tapes should be cut with scissors and alternate pieces spliced together this is a long process which can be appreciably expedited if you have access to a cutting room and use film tape which is much larger and easier to handle you can carry this experiment further by taking a talking film of b. and talking film of j. splicing sound and image track twenty four alternations per second as i have intimated it is advisable to exercise some care in choosing your partner for such experiments since the results can be quite drastic b. finds himself talking and thinking just like j. j. sees b.'s image in his own face who's face b. and j. are continually aware of each other when separated invisible and persistent presence they are in fact becoming each other you see b. retroactively was j. by the fact of being recorded on j.'s sound and image track experiments with spliced tape can give rise to explosive relationships properly handled of course to a high degree of efficient cooperation you will begin to see the advantage conveyed on j. if he carried out such experiments without the awareness of b. and so many applications of the spliced tape principle will suggest themselves to the alert reader suppose you are some creep in a grey flannel suit you want to present a new concept of advertising to the old man it is creative advertising so before you goes up against the old man you record the old man's voice and splices your own voice in expounding your new concept and put it out on the office air-conditioning

system splice yourself in with your favorite pop singers splice yourself in with newscasters prime ministers presidents

why stop there
why stop anywhere

everybody splice himself in with everybody else yes boys that's me there by the cement mixer the next step and i warn you it will be expensive is programmed tape recorders a fully programmed machine would be set to record and play back at selected intervals to rewind and start over after a selected interval automatically remaining in continuous operation suppose you have three programmed machines tape recorder 1 programmed to play back five seconds while tape recorder 2 records tape recorder 2 play back three seconds while tape recorder 1 records now say you are arguing with your boy friend or girl friend remembering what was said last time and thinking of things to say next time round and round you just can't shut up put all your arguments and complaints on tape recorder 1 and call tape recorder 1 by your own name on tape recorder 2 put all the things he or she said to you or might say when occasion arises out of the tape recorders now make the machines talk tape recorder 1 play back five seconds tape recorder 2 record tape recorder 2 play back three seconds tape recorder 1 record run it through fifteen minutes half an hour now switch intervals running the interval switch you used on tape recorder 1 back on tape recorder 2 the interval switch may be as important as the context listen to the two machines mix it around now on tape recorder 3 you can introduce the factor of irrelevant response so put just anything on tape recorder 3 old joke old tune piece of the street television radio and program tape recorder 3 into the argument

tape recorder 1 waited up for you until two o'clock last night

tape recorder 3 what we want to know is who put the sand in the spinach

the use of irrelevant response will be found effective in breaking obsessional association tracks all association tracks are obsessional get it out of your head and into the machines stop arguing stop complaining stop talking let the machines argue complain and talk a tape recorder is an externalized section of the human nervous system you can find out more about the nervous system and gain more control over your reactions by using the tape recorder than you could find out sitting twenty years in the lotus posture or wasting your time on the analytic couch

listen to your present time tapes and you will begin to see who you are and what you are doing here mix yesterday in with today and hear tomorrow your future rising out of old recordings you are a programmed tape recorder set to record and play back

who programs you

who decides what tapes play back in present time

who plays back your old humiliations and defeats holding you in prerecorded preset time

you don't have to listen to that sound you can program your own playback you can decide what tapes you want played back in present time study your associational patterns and find out what cases in what prerecordings for playback program those old tapes out it's all done with tape recorders there are many things you can do with programmed tape recorders stage performances programmed at arbitrary intervals so each performance is unpredictable and unique allowing any

degree of audience participation readings concerts programmed tape recorders can create a happening anywhere programmed tape recorders are of course essential to any party and no modern host would bore his guests with a straight present time party in a modern house every room is bugged recorders record and play back from hidden mikes and loudspeakers phantom voices mutter through corridors and rooms word visible as a haze tape recorders in the gardens answer each other like barking dogs sound track brings the studio on set you can change the look of a city by putting your own sound track into the streets here are some experiments filming a sound track operations on set find a neighborhood with slate roofs and red brick chimneys cool grey sound track fog horns distant train whistles frogs croaking music across the golf course cool blue recordings in a cobblestone market with blue shutters all the sad old showmen stand there in blue twilight a rustle of darkness and wires when several thousand people working with tape recorders and filming subsequent action select their best sound tracks and film footage and splice together you will see something interesting now consider the harm that can be done and has been done when recording and playback is expertly carried out in such a way that the people affected do not know what is happening thought feeling and apparent sensory impressions can be precisely manipulated and controlled riots and demonstrations to order for example they use old anti-semitic recordings against the chinese in indonesia run shop and get rich and always give the business to another tiddly wink pretty familiar suppose you want to bring down the area go in and record all the ugliest stupidest dialogue the most discordant sound track you can find and keep playing it back which will occasion more ugly stupid dialogue recorded and played back on and on always selecting the ugliest material possibilities are unlimited you want to start a riot put your machines in the street with riot recordings move fast enough you can stay just ahead of the riot surfing we call it no margin for error recollect poor old bums caught out in a persian market riot recordings hid under his jellaba and they skinned him alive raw peeled thing writhing there in the noon sun and we got the picture

do you get the picture

the techniques and experiments described here have been used and are being used by agencies official and non official without your awareness and very much to your disadvantage any number can play wittgenstein said no proposition can contain itself as an argument the only thing not prerecorded on a prerecorded set is the prerecording itself that is any recording in which a random factor operates any street recording you can prerecord your future you can hear and see what you want to hear and see the experiments described here were explained and demonstrated to me by ian somerville of london in this article i am writing as his ghost

look around you look at a control machine programmed to select the ugliest stupidest most vulgar and degraded sounds for recording and playback which provokes uglier stupider more vulgar and degraded sounds to be recorded and play back inexorable degradation look forward to dead end look forward to ugly vulgar playback tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow what are newspapers doing but selecting the ugliest sounds for playback by and large if it's ugly it's news and if that isn't enough i quote from the editorial page of the new york daily news we can take care of china and if russia intervenes we can take care of that nation too

the only good communist is a dead communist let's take care of slave driver castro
next what are we waiting for let's bomb china now and let's stay armed to the teeth
for centuries this ugly vulgar bray put out for mass playback you want to spread
hysteria record and play back the most stupid and hysterical reactions

marijuana marijuana why that's deadlier than cocaine

it will turn a man into a homicidal maniac he said steadily his eyes cold as he
thought of the vampires who suck riches from the vile traffic in pot quite literally
swollen with human blood he reflected grimly and his jaw set pushers should be
pushed into the electric chair

strip the bastards naked

all right let's see your arms

or in the mortal words of harry j anslinger the laws must reflect society's dis-
approval of the addict

an uglier reflection than society's disapproval would be hard to find the mean
cold eyes of decent american women to tight lips and no thank you from the shop
keeper snarling cops pale nigger killing eyes reflecting society's disapproval fuck-
ing queers i say shoot them if on the other hand you select calm sensible reac-
tions for recordings and playback you will spread calmness and good sense

is this being done

obviously it is not only way to break the inexorable down spiral of ugly uglier
ugliest recording and playback is with counterrecording and playback the first
step is to isolate and cut association lines of the control machine carry a tape
recorder with you and record all the ugliest stupidest things cut your ugly tapes in
together speed up slow down play backwards inch the tape you will hear one
ugly voice and see one ugly spirit is made of ugly old prerecordings the more
you run the tapes through and cut them up the less power they will have cut the
prerecordings into air into thin air

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Record, CD, Analog, Digital

CHRISTIAN MARCLAY & YASUNAO TONE

In the late 1970s, concurrent with the birth of HipHop, Christian Marclay (1955–) pioneered the use of turntables and found recordings to make experimental music in the context of art. John Cage, Paul Hindemith, and Ernst Toch had begun such experiments forty years earlier. Yet it was Marclay who most fully explored this musical territory. Inspired by punk rock and by avant-garde art movements such as Dada and Fluxus, Marclay used skipping thrift-store records to produce percussive effects. He cut up and reassembled them into new composites and employed multiple turntables to produce inventive and often humorous collages. Using found records, album covers, audio tapes, and snapshots, Marclay has also produced a body of photographs, sculptures, videos, and installations that have been widely exhibited in galleries and museums.

Yasunao Tone (1935–) has been producing happenings, experimental music, and digital art for more than four decades. In 1960, with Takehisa Kosugi, Tone formed Group Ongaku, the first collective improvisation ensemble in Japan; and, in 1962, he became an active member of the Japanese wing of Fluxus. Always interested in the manipulation of technology to aesthetic ends, Tone began experimenting with CDs and CD players in the early 1980s. In 1985, he produced his first "wounded CD" by attaching pin-hole-punctured transparent tape to commercial CDs in order to override the CD player's error-correction system and produce sporadic bursts of white noise.

In this discussion with the editors of *Music* magazine, Marclay and Tone discuss their work and compare strategies for manipulating analog and digital recordings.

CHRISTIAN MARCLAY: You make CDs skip?

YASUNAO TONE: It's not really skipping. It's distorting information. A CD consists of a series of samples. You know bytes and bits, right? One byte contains sixteen bits of information. So, if I block one or two bits, information still