

*William S. Burroughs: A Man Within* (2010)  
Directed by Yony Leyser  
DVD Oscilloscope Laboratories (2011) 87 Minutes  
\$29.99

Reviewed by Kurt Hemmer, Harper College

*William S. Burroughs: A Man Within* is a documentary film that executes exactly what it intends to accomplish: it celebrates the iconic status of Burroughs for the eternally dispossessed. First-time filmmaker Yony Leyser, who produced, wrote, and directed the film, has created an extraordinary documentary about a Beat writer's cultural significance. We are presented with a man, perhaps occasionally possessed by genius, often verging on madness, plagued by intense loneliness, who nevertheless managed to have a profound impact on several generations of exceptional artists in multiple genres. In a review entitled "The Masterpiece Has No Clothes," which ostensibly was an examination of the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *Naked Lunch*, but reads more like a vicious attack on all aspects of Burroughs's life and work, Stefan Beck writes, "Burroughs is often said to have exerted a major influence on popular culture. This seems limited to the fact that his work is alluded to in a Joy Division song ('Interzone,' named for a setting in *Naked Lunch*); that he has a brief role in Gus Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989); that he has an even briefer cameo in a U2 video; and that the rock group Steely Dan is named after a dildo featured in *Naked Lunch*" (2). Leyser's film decisively reveals Beck's "limited" assessment of Burroughs's cultural influence as ignorant, and this is exactly the kind of thing Leyser wanted to do. The music, including songs provided by Sonic Youth, Patti Smith, and The Master Musicians of Jajouka, beautifully blends with the flow of Leyser's images. Peter Weller, who gave one of the most underrated performances as a Burroughs-inspired character in David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* (1991), does a professional job of providing just the right amount of gravitas to the voiceover (though I wish he had lost his distracting cigar during the interview clips he is in). The production and postproduction of the DVD also need to be applauded. The packaging is one of the most handsome I have ever seen—for any film. But what is truly praiseworthy of this film is its ability to establish Burroughs's iconic status.

Leyser interviews many of the right people: James Grauerholz, Victor Bockris, Patti Smith, Anne Waldman, Diane di Prima, Amiri Baraka, John Giorno, Iggy Pop, and the wonderfully eloquent and astute Genesis Breyer P-Orridge. I was happy to see Burroughs scholars Barry Miles (I would have liked to have seen see more of him) and Regina Weinreich (though she mistakenly seems to suggest that Burroughs was first given opium by his family's housekeeper), but I wish there had been other Burroughs scholars, like Jennie Skerl, Timothy S. Murphy, and Oliver Harris. But, then again, establishing Burroughs's credibility in academia was not Leyser's intent. Though I found it excessive that John Waters, a friend and mentor of Leyser's, appears on screen a dozen times, Waters articulates Leyser's message as well as or better than most of the other talking heads: William S. Burroughs was inspirational for a wide range of artists both in and out of the literary world.

Inevitably, Leyser's film will be compared with Howard Brookner's enlightening film *Burroughs: The Movie* (1983), which is much more of a traditional biographical documentary

that concentrates to a greater degree on Burroughs the writer (we see several more scenes of Burroughs actually reading his work) than Leyser's film, which has the shade of hagiography. *Burroughs: The Movie* has been out of print for many years and has, unfortunately, never been issued on DVD. Brookner's film gives us insights from Brion Gysin and Herbert Huncke that are sorely missing from Leyser's film. It is also in *Burroughs: The Movie* that we hear Burroughs's claim that every writer's work is autobiographical to some degree, that an Irish maid told him seductive stories about how opium produces beautiful dreams, and Allen Ginsberg's speculation that Burroughs's attempt to shoot a glass off his wife Joan's head was a suicidal gesture instigated by her, which is a theory I categorically reject. Burroughs himself always maintained that it was he, not Joan, who suggested the William Tell routine. A close analysis of James Grauerholz's definitive essay "The Death of Joan Vollmer Burroughs: What Really Happened?" has led me to conclude that Joan did not instigate the shooting, nor did she expect to die when Burroughs foolishly pulled out his gun. Perhaps Ginsberg's speculation in Brookner's film helped other theories develop over the years diminishing Burroughs's culpability in this tragic incident. Yet there are also scenes in Brookner's film that appear to be purposefully superfluous, such as the rooftop scenes with Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Lucien Carr, there are also scenes that reveal a rarely seen sentimental side to Burroughs, such as his visit with the Burroughs family's old gardener, Otto Belev. *A Man Within* clearly has a higher quality of postproduction, but Brookner's film includes some extraordinary scenes: Burroughs recalling the Irish "crone" who taught him the lost art of calling the toads; Mortimer Burroughs, William's brother, revealing how the experience of reading *Naked Lunch* disgusted him; a nightmarish *SNL*-like skit of a routine from *Naked Lunch* with Andy Warhol superstar Jackie Curtis playing a nurse; and Burroughs drunkenly providing his militant stance against homophobia. Yet the most poignant and provocative scene in Brookner's film is when Carr tells us, "[Burroughs's] morals are probably boy scout morals, true blue, you know, and the last thing he wants anyone to know is that."

Brookner has provided us with a strong documentary about Burroughs's life and Leyser has provided us with a beautiful documentary about the impact that life had on others. In Leyser's film, Viktor Bockris claims that Burroughs is "arguably the greatest writer in the world in the second half of the twentieth century," but Leyser's film, not intending to defend such a bold statement, does little to justify that claim. Beck writes, "It is unthinkable that Burroughs's writing had a significant influence on anyone above high-school age" (2). This is a statement of a misinformed critic. As evidence, in the rock music world, which at times can ascend to the realm of great art (though I am acutely aware that critics like Beck would disagree), Lou Reed, Patti Smith, and Iggy Pop have all given testimony about the influence of Burroughs's writing on the content of their lyrics, while Mick Jagger, David Bowie, and Jello Biafra have stated that Burroughs's technique (the cut-up, first discovered by Gysin) influenced the composition of some of their own lyrics. In the literary world such major figures as William Gibson, Kathy Acker, and J. G. Ballard have cited Burroughs as a major influence. Beck's dismissal of Burroughs's writing as "boring" and "embarrassing" with a "pathetically limited" vocabulary needs to be contended with (2). With the centennial of Burroughs's birth rapidly approaching (2014), it is time for a documentary film that examines exclusively Burroughs legacy to the literary world. Leyser has done a definitive work on the icon, now is the time to seriously examine the writer.

## Works Cited

Beck, Stefan. "The Masterpiece Has No Clothes." *The Barnes & Noble Review*. Barnes & Noble, 13 April 2010: 1-2. Web. 19 May 2010.

*Burroughs: The Movie*. Dir. Howard Brookner. Citifilmworks, 1983. VHS.