

Naked Lunch @ 50: Anniversary Essays

Oliver Harris and Ian Macfadyen, editors

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The stakes are high for *Naked Lunch @ 50*, a collection of essays by scholars, critics, artists, writers and musicians: is it possible to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of a revolutionary book without jeopardizing its radical edge through the format of a commemorative Festschrift? The preface announces the ambition to reflect the radical heterogeneity of Burroughs' work and to address gaps in *Naked Lunch* scholarship. Indeed, this handsome volume succeeds admirably as a Criticism Hoard, comparable to Burroughs' own Word Hoard: helpful for struggling novice readers and an exhilarating source of inspiration for scholars, teachers, Beat studies specialists and admirers of Naked Lunch and William S. Burroughs.

Photographer and filmmaker Jonas Mekas sets a predominant theme for the volume with his diary entry from 1958: *Naked Lunch* as a landmark historical event and creative impetus. Six dossiers of illuminating and suggestive observations by Ian Macfadyen introduce each section. This innovative format contributes to the dynamic experience of reading this collection. Rather than encounter a fixed and sclerotic group of essays, the reader will experience a mobile series of intersecting points simulating the energy and dynamism of Burroughs' own thought and gesturing toward areas for further research. Oliver Harris offers a dazzling reconstruction of the origins of the title and the evolution of the final form of *Naked Lunch*, demonstrating the crucial importance of genetic criticism for appreciation of the work. Robert Holton's reading of the "Deposition" and "Postscript" situates these sections in their cultural context and enhances understanding of this complex book.

Among the finest essays in the collection are those that draw connections between historical realities and literary form. Rob Johnson reveals the importance of Burroughs' southern upbringing and his stay in East Texas for the routines and dialogue of *Naked Lunch* and points out important links between racism and addiction within the text. Allen Hibbard discusses how changing conditions in Tangier are reflected in the novel's development and final form, while Kurt Hemmer writes of Burroughs' aesthetics and his complicated relation to Moroccan nationalism and colonialism. Andrew Hussey draws attention to how Burroughs' travels between Paris and Tangier, between the center of colonial power and the colony, illuminate a set of political tensions that inform and shape *Naked Lunch*, as well as discusses Burroughs' relation to avant-garde movements in Paris that articulated the language of European anticolonialism. The importance of the Beat Hotel period for the development of Beat Art, as well as the significance of Burroughs' political stance in the sixties, informs Jean-Jacques Lebel's contribution.

The different perspectives of the writers in this collection affirm the multifaceted appeal of Burroughs' work. Musician and writer Eric Anderson creates a portrait of Burroughs as a literary outlaw with an affinity for Rimbaud who was able to successfully embody the motto "Live fast, die old." R. B. Morris approaches Burroughs as a poet and musician and discusses his profound effect on other artists. A first encounter with *Naked Lunch*, as well as the book's subsequent influence on musicians and authors, distinguishes Barry Miles's essay. The reception of *Naked Lunch* in Germany and in apartheid South Africa informs the contributions of Jurgen Ploog and Shaun de Waal; de Waal also presents an illuminating discussion of his use of queer theory in approaching the novel.

Two essayists commemorate *Naked Lunch* as a material object. Jed Birmingham evaluates the Olympia Press edition of the book as a collectable object, with its dust jacket, wrappers, title page and price stamp, while Polina Mackay analyzes the significance of the cover design of different editions.

The extraordinary multimedia and multidisciplinary range of Burroughs studies are also highlighted by the essays. Jennie Skerl offers a useful discussion of the current state of *Naked Lunch* scholarship—new preoccupations and current theoretical perspectives such as sexuality, power and control systems and genetic criticism—as well as presents responses to David Cronenberg's film version of the book. The tendency to see Burroughs as providing modes and methods of resistance is problematized by Loren Glass, who assesses Burroughs' relation to the structural transformations of capitalism. Davis Schneiderman illustrates recuperation versus revelation as potential strategies for reading the text, comments on the tendency for selective readings that dispense with inassimilable prose, and calls into question a conventional means of explaining the novel through a drug-oriented perspective. Burroughs' importance as a source of creative inspiration and innovation for artists is emphasized by Théophile Aries. The relation of *Naked Lunch* to other genres centers Gail-Nina Anderson's presentation on the influence of horror films on the novel and Timothy S. Murphy's discussion of how "old pulp magazines," hard-boiled detective pulps, Westerns, erotic adventures and especially science fiction form its hybrid generic framework. DJ Spooky addresses the prescience of Burroughs' info-ecology, and Richard Doyle argues Burroughs' relevance for bioscience.

Aesthetically, the book is a treat. Cover photos, gorgeous end papers by artist Philip Taaffe, design and layout argue that this book was indeed a labor of love and remind us of Burroughs' own important work with the visual. The illustrations include rare photographs and a haunting self-portrait by Burroughs.

Given this valuable eclectic collection which admirably demonstrates the multifaceted, dynamic and evolving world of Burroughs' scholarship, what will be left for the volume of essays I confidently foresee attending *Naked Lunch* in its 75th year? Greater emphasis on the literary qualities and aesthetic strategies of Burroughs' work, more sustained analysis of his ingenious approach to sources and his literary and artistic legacy, increased attention to the "inassimilable prose" and more nuanced approaches to his emotional formations, his comedy, his work with temporality and his cultural context will inspire even more developed and revolutionary readings.