

*Words of Advice: William S. Burroughs on the Road*  
Directed by Lars Movin and Steen Møller Rasmussen  
DVD Microcinema International & Plagiat Film (2010) 74 Minutes  
\$24.95

Reviewed by Kurt Hemmer, Harper College

*Words of Advice: William S. Burroughs on the Road* is a 2007 film now available on DVD that is essential viewing for Burroughs aficionados and scholars. Lars Movin and Steen Møller Rasmussen should be commended for creating a documentary that, more than any other film focused on a Beat writer made before it, attempts to deal with the language more than the legend. Along with footage from Antony Balch's experimental films with Burroughs, we get brief biographical snippets intended to create context without wallowing in the gossip that often surrounds the Burroughs myth to the point of muddying his artistic credibility. Yet a few crucial things are left out, too. Acknowledging the crucial contribution Brion Gysin made influencing Burroughs's "cut-up" experiments, the film does not examine the other influences on Burroughs's writing, though perhaps they should have been included. In the extras, Ann Douglas speaks of Jack Kerouac's idea of "being on the road" as important to the Beats' and Burroughs's own identities. The film's unnecessary subtitle and interspersed rolling road clips suggest that Kerouac's influence on Burroughs will be discussed, but neither Kerouac nor Allen Ginsberg is brought up. Yet the film succeeds, for the most part, keeping the focus on Burroughs and his words. The notorious shooting by Burroughs of his wife, Joan, is not even mentioned in the film, which is a step in the right direction. Another important contribution of the documentary is that it interviews many of the right people. Hal Willner reminisces about Burroughs famous *Saturday Night Live* performance in 1981 and producing the CD *Dead City Radio* (1990). We are surprised to hear from John Giorno that Burroughs was kind, gentle, and shy when hosting company in "The Bunker," his Lower East Side apartment from the 1970s, which Giorno quickly guides us through. James Grauerholz, who met Burroughs in 1974 and later became Burroughs's personal assistant, is greatly appreciated for his tour of Burroughs's last little red residence in Lawrence, Kansas and his insights about the authenticity of Burroughs's personality. We also see Burroughs's cemetery for his beloved cats, animals he saw as psychic companions. Yet it is Burroughs reading, particularly the fantastically humorous passages like the "Mummy" routine from *The Western Lands* (1987), that enlivens the DVD.

The film is based around the October 29, 1983, reading Burroughs gave in Copenhagen, Denmark on the last day of his Scandinavian Tour, which can be seen in its entirety as one of the extras on the DVD. This point of emphasis is both a weakness and a strength in the film. It simultaneously forces the focus of the documentary on "The Last Trilogy," aka "The Red Night Trilogy," while presenting Burroughs with a consistency of delivery that helps the viewer appreciate what Burroughs was like as a performer in the 1980s. We hear pieces from *Naked Lunch* (1959), *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983), *The Cat Inside* (1986), and *The Western Lands* (1987). Despite Giorno's claim that Burroughs was one of the greatest performers in the world, we see that even the cool and collected Burroughs was not immune to accidentally bumping into the microphone, and at times the sound recording of the

reading is uneven. But what certainly comes across, more times than not, is the effectiveness of Burroughs's delivery and his charmingly perverse sense of humor. A higher percentage of screen time is devoted to seeing and hearing Burroughs read, and hearing others discuss the significance of his writing, than in any other Beat documentary.

But then things get strange. One of Burroughs's very good friends relates the story of a plumbing problem which resulted in the friend managing to capture a Burroughs turd in an epoxy resin for posterity. I do not think this scene will help people on the fence take Burroughs more seriously. I wonder if a comparable scene could be even imagined in a documentary about James Joyce or Toni Morrison. Perhaps it should have been put with the extras, which include two videos showing how Burroughs produced his shotgun art. I once told the person beside me at a Burroughs art exhibit how unfortunate I found Burroughs shotgun art to be. As it turns out, the person was the curator. The videos in the extras do nothing to modify my opinion.

Yet the most painful episode to watch in this film, which is dedicated to Dan Turèll, is Turèll's interview with Burroughs. Turèll, considered by some to be a Danish Beat writer, was a prolific author heavily influenced by Burroughs's work who tragically died of esophageal cancer at the age of forty-seven in 1993. In a great ironical twist, Burroughs found Turèll's black fingernail polish and Mephistophelian appearance to be weird. There seems to be a language barrier that Burroughs refuses to hurdle during Turèll's line of questioning. The utter lack of chemistry between Turèll and Burroughs devolves into Burroughs's outward antagonism. The viewer sees, hears, and feels Burroughs turn himself off.

Though it hurts to watch Turèll's pain, it is a pleasure to hear the scholars in this film. Beat scholar Regina Weinreich encourages us to take Burroughs's work seriously as literally ahead of its time (though I question whether or not we can give credit to Burroughs for presaging the outbreak of AIDS). Ann Douglas, who has been used as an authoritative commentator in documentaries about Kerouac and Ernest Hemingway, urges us to see Burroughs as one of the major writers of his generation. Most astutely, Jennie Skerl helps us see Burroughs as a writer who critiques the structures of reality, consciousness, identity, and language; a pioneer who breaks down media boundaries; and an artist who excelled at being a satirist, social critic, and humorist. Clearly this film captures one of the essential qualities of Burroughs's writing which often eludes his most fervent critics: *humor*. If Yony Leyser's film *William S. Burroughs: A Man Within* (2010) is the best executed film about Burroughs, and Howard Brookner's *Burroughs: The Movie* (1983) is the best biography, then *Words of Advice* is the best advocate for Burroughs as writer. The compass has been set and others will surely follow.