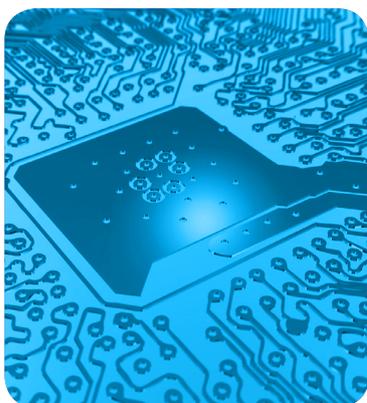


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**The dispersal of
authorial subjectivity
from modernism to
digital literature:
William Burroughs's
Nova Trilogy
as embodiment and
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Sara Sanz Bonilla



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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the figure of William Burroughs (1914-1997) and his *Nova Trilogy*, which tackles the questions of subjectivity and the renovation of both author's and reader's role. Burroughs was fascinated by this topic, which made him develop his "word-virus" theory and the *cut-up* method, a literary strategy based on the reconceptualization of terms and fragmentation, among others techniques. It was a fundamental tool against pre-established modes of subjetivization, and therefore a key point in the transformation of the reader's passive role into an active one. In this way, his work will demonstrate the importance of subjectivity in 20th century literature, and will later serve to reference how this question perpetuates in new narratologies (i.e. electronic literature). The purpose of this work is to illustrate the postmodern concerns about the issue and Burroughs' contribution to both his time and the future digital creations.

Keywords: William Burroughs, cut-up method, word-virus, postmodernism, subjectivity, electronic literature

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1. Introduction

From the beginning of the 20th century, writers became absorbed in the quest of new forms of subjectivity. Modernist writers like T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein or James Joyce were interested in the exploration of experimental literary techniques that could offer new possibilities out of the restructuration of poetic language and narrative linearity. Consequently, they provoked a new kind of involvement of the reader in the interpretation of the literary work, now devoid of a clear authorial center. Their style evolved into complex forms of literature, which aimed to subvert the classical concepts of author-reader-text.

Along that century, this reconceptualization of the notion of subjectivity brought about the dissolution of the authorial figure, which became more and more fragile and functional. Authors like Paul Auster, Robert Coover or Thomas Pynchon still played with the possibilities of collage, fragmentation and the authorial dissolution. Postmodernists would continue a modernist tradition regarding the text's growing openness and indeterminacy, but they would tackle the issue from a different point of view: they erased and played with the ontological boundaries reader-author-character, and redirected the reader's attention to the code —how things are told— to show how language fails to report reality.

In the eighties, there appeared a new type of literature due to the digital advances. Electronic literature was then created out of computers and it required the collaboration of the reader in order to create stories. It also entangled the issues of authority, identity and the anxiety generated around the figure of the author, and most of its variants point to the destabilization of linearity, the fragmentation or suspension of the plot or the reorganization of established meanings. All this kept demanding an active involvement of the reader, following a tradition inaugurated more than half a century before. The new possibilities that the electronic format offered brought about new forms of interaction author-text-reader that continued the postmodernist concerns about authorial subjectivity.

Within the emergent theories conceiving new forms of subjectivity and uses of language in the second half of the 20th century, the work of William Burroughs (1914 - 1997) is very remarkable. He was denominated a “culture jammer”, the one who “attempts to decode the implied messages embedded within our shared systems of signification (...) and

to afterwards expose how these signifying systems work” (Tietchen, 2001: 114). The manipulation exercised by the mass media over the population led Burroughs to comprehend that in literature the reader is usually also forced to one single way of interpretation, which is imposed by powerful, authorial narrative voices. Consequently, his *cut-up* method—in which different fragments of texts are combined with more or less arbitrariness to conform new meanings—, attempted to break those institutionalized forms of narration. This literary strategy was deeply rooted in Burroughs’s previous experiments with audio and video manipulation, something that he would evoke in his narration and that gave it a multimedia and technological aesthetic. Readers thus get involved in the process of interpretation through an extra effort in the understanding of the literary work, which was no longer linear nor monologic. In his *Nova Trilogy*—which comprehends three different volumes (i.e. *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket that Exploded* and *Nova Express*)—, Burroughs developed his *cut-up* technique, a central strategy in his previous and acclaimed work *Naked Lunch* (1959) that followed the reflections exposed in *The Electronic Revolution* (1970).

This paper will analyze this tendency towards the reconfiguration of subjectivity and the reconceptualization of terms like “author” and “reader” in 20th century literature. Firstly, a brief panorama on both modernist and postmodernist movements will be given, in order to further extend the question of subjectivity in electronic literature. Moreover, William Burroughs’s *Nova Trilogy* will be analyzed, since these novels become an interesting point of study regarding the postmodernist concerns about the role of both authors and readers. Burroughs’s writings show the instability of the authorial voice that was being explored at the time, and it also foreshadowed the techniques explored by electronic literature. His linguistic theory (“word-virus”) will also be analyzed, because it emphasized the necessary break against imposed authorial voices and the empowerment of the reader; his *cut-up* method and the viral argument of the word are crucial for understanding the particular disruptions of the language conceived in these three volumes. *Nova Trilogy* shows Burroughs’s visionary aesthetic in relation to new digital narrativities: the *cut-up* method or the importance of the multimedia devices evoke the instability of subjectivity that electronic literature is exploring nowadays.

2. The instability of subjectivity in 20th century literature

2.1 Modernism and postmodernism

Subjectivity was one of the main concerns of the 20th century. It affected philosophy, painting, cinema, literature and other fields. Regarding literature, it had a great impact on modernist writers like T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein or James Joyce, and it continued in postmodernism with writers like Paul Auster, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover or William Burroughs, whose *Nova Trilogy* will be analyzed in chapter 3. This interest on subjectivity led these writers to develop literary strategies in order to achieve some goals, such as the decentralization of the authorial voice and the empowerment of the reader when attributing new meanings to the texts. In this chapter, a panoramic view of the reconceptualization of subjectivity in postmodernist writings will be offered. Nevertheless, since this movement inherited the dislocation and weakening of robust subjectivities, some notes about certain modernist authors will be also given.

At the beginning of the 20th century, authors like Eliot, Joyce or Stein developed new literary techniques that aimed to revitalize language and alter conventional literary structures, because they thought that conventional modes of signification were exhausted and obsolete. These strategies entailed the instability of the authorial voice and, in consequence, the new importance given to the reader's subjectivity. The texts were so difficult to interpret —due to the disappearance of a coherent authorial voice— that the reader had to make a bigger effort in order to provide it with meaning, an active role that challenged the very notions and meanings of the term “reader” itself. Some of the writing techniques were *collage*¹, intertextuality² or the *stream of consciousness*³, that generally involved the rupture of linguistic conventionalisms —sometimes in a radical way, as in

¹ “A work assembled wholly or partly from fragments of other writings, incorporating allusions, quotations, and foreign phrases. Originally applied to paintings with pasted-on elements, the term has been extended to an important kind of modernist poetry” (Baldick, 2008: 61).

² “A term coined by Julia Kristeva to designate the various relationships that a given text may have with other texts. These intertextual relationships include anagram, allusion, adaptation, translation, parody, pastiche, imitation and other kinds of transformation” (Baldick, 2008: 171).

³ “The continuous flow of sense-perceptions, thoughts, feelings and memories in the human mind; or a literary method of representing such a blending of mental processes in fictional characters, usually in an unpunctuated or disjointed form or interior monologue” (Baldick, 2008: 318).

Stein's strategy of morphological recategorization⁴ —. The use of those literary experiments forced the reader to reorder the content in order to find out the meaning of the new composition⁵.

As a consequence, the author was never again considered a unified, singular or individual being, but it was rather the result of a compound of voices and textures projected on the paper. One of the main works by T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, illustrates this experimentation and exploration of the fragmented subject. There, it can be observed how the centrality of the author/main voice starts to dissolve beneath “textures” (voices, parts of fragmented discourse and register) and pieces of previous works (“ready-made”⁶). The lack of a clear center of consciousness vertebrating his work makes difficult the extraction of meaning, and the authorial voice adopts different variations and formulas depending on which words it is identified with. The subject expands to new dimensions: it encounters new roles that redefine its nature and, in consequence, find broader possibilities of action. These uses of language and composition of texts make the reader investigate the links between those different voices and textures, an effort that empowers him because there seems to be no authorial impositions over the meaning. They are strategies that foreshadow certain structuralist theories that would gain relevance around the 1930s. For example, those by Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, who studied

“the ways in which novels achieve effects by violating conventions. They wrote (...) about the French *Nouveau Roman*, which disrupted readers' expectations about plot, character, and narrative point of view” (Culler, 2002: ix).

Some decades after modernism, postmodernism maintained the interest on the question of subjectivity, adopting different experimental approaches to the issue. Postmodernism was an artistic movement that affected diverse cultural fields —architecture, philosophy and literature, among others—, and that began in the mid-20th century. Although its characteristics cannot be fully summarized (its evolution/death is still in debate), some

⁴ The recategorization (Bhat, 1994) is a grammatical phenomenon in which a word changes its morphological category moved by the syntactical context. In *Tender Buttons*, Stein uses adjectives in the place of verbs, verbs in the place of nouns and so on. She forces the reader to recategorize, and therefore words are devoid of their assumed meanings, creating new ones.

⁵ “Composition” was an important concept in the avant-garde and abstract movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was associated to the motto “art for art's sake”.

⁶ “Ready-made” was the name given to those pieces of art (either pictorial or literary) already developed by an artist, and reused by others in order to make up *collages*.

theorists tend to describe it in opposition to modernist aesthetics and assumptions. Allen, for example, includes a summarized chart extracted from Hassan’s (1993) article on postmodernism, where part of its characteristics are analyzed in contraposition to those of the previous modernist period:

Modernism	Postmodernism
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Centering	Dispersal
Genre/Boundary	Text/Inter-text
Interpretation/reading	Against interpretation/misreading
<i>Lisible</i> (Readerly)	<i>Scriptable</i> (Writerly)
Origin/Cause	Difference- <i>Différance</i> /Trace

(Adapted from Allen, 2011: 183).

Table 1. Differences between modernism and postmodernism

Nevertheless, to enclose postmodernism under a series of premises and aesthetics would be useless, because there are a lot of artistic variants that are nourished by what we would call postmodernism. That is why McHale argues that postmodernism failed “to satisfy the criteria of objecthood” and, therefore, it must be admitted that it “only exists discursively, in the discourses we produce about it and using it” (1992: 1). In order to understand this literary movement and gather all its variants, he continues, it is important to take into account “not *a* construction of postmodernism, but a plurality of constructions” (1992: 3). Nevertheless, there exists a point of departure that defines the main point of all these postmodernist variants, and that is the shift from epistemology to ontology, a philosophical distinction that gives support to this study: how the 20th century skepticism starts doubting the dialectical tools by which people understand and establish a relationship with reality, and ends questioning the very essence of that reality.

The ontological key that involves postmodernism seems to highlight the core of characteristics presented by Hassan (1993). But the reality is that many theorists do not find a clear point of rupture between modernism and postmodernism. Allen, referring to theorists such as Jencks (1989) or Hutcheon (1988), argues that “what characterizes postmodernism is a double codedness” (2011: 183). “This doble-codedness”, he

continues, “questions the available modes of representation in culture whilst recognizing that it must still employ those modes” (2011: 183). In consequence, postmodernism continues a literary tradition but from a very different perspective: “its juxtaposition of styles and codes, of different and sometimes apparently incompatible forms of representation, serves to question, disturb and even subvert the dominance of those established forms” (Allen, 2011: 184-185). Within this quest of structural, code subversion and restructuration, the role of the subject was also reinvented. Certainly, if the way reality was represented—and the methods for subverting that reality— was the core of the postmodern concerns, subjects/authors had to change their vision and methods when reporting it. Allen, as Hutcheon and other theorists, pray the influence of poststructuralist theorists on postmodernism. Hutcheon recounts the impact that Lacan’s (structuralist), Derrida’s or Foucault’s (poststructuralists) theories on the decentering of the subject had on postmodern literature (1988: 159) and, in consequence, how these theories are easily found in many writers’ works. In a debate about the problem of subjectivity, Hutcheon concludes that

“[the] subversion of the stability of point of view, the inheritance of modernist experiments (Faulkner, Woolf, Joyce), takes two major forms. On the one hand, we find overt, deliberately manipulative narrators; on the other, no one single perspective but myriad voices, often not completely localizable in the textual universe. In both cases, the inscription of subjectivity is problematized, though in very different ways” (1988: 160).

The postmodernist reformulations on the modernist aesthetics would alter not only the authorial degree of exposure, but also the multiplicities and recreations of the author out and inside the text. This instigates a new focus on the (hidden) subjectivity of the material author, the rehearsed presence of an authorial voice within the text, and the active role of the reader’s subjectivity when facing a game of authorial identities. If modernist authors hid their presence in order to exercise a major control over their texts, postmodernists played with the inconsistency of the authorial voice; their texts were open paths where readers could not always find a specific ending or answer.

Such is the case of Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*. In the first story ("City of Glass"), the reader finds the "author"⁷ in the narrative, and in the last one ("The Locked Room") there is an unknown narrative voice that attributes to himself the creation of the two previous texts in the book. This problematizes the ontological boundaries between authors-readers-characters, pointing out to the importance of the reader's interpretation on complex, undefined and intermingled plots. Dimovitz explains that the combination of psychoanalysis and existentialism that readers find during the trilogy "mediates several clear analyses of subjectivity. (...) Three major ontological dimensions operate, each of which is offered as the origin of the others at one point or another: consciousness, subjectivity-for-itself, and subjectivity-for-others" (2006: 626). Auster's characters reflect the possibilities of this shift in subjective control; the problem posed by this indeterminacy of the authorial voice redirects the classical concept of author to revisionist views. Because it is never again a reliable narrator, the reader finds the way throughout a reading that rejects authorial impositions. Consequently, Zilcosky explains that this dissolution stages Barthes' theory on the death of the author, since "Auster experiments, in fictional practice, with the possibilities of life after authorial death. He authorizes his own (...) disappearances to explore writing beyond authorship" (1998: 197).

In the case of Coover's "The Magic Poker", the narrator explains its own fictional creation, and the process of composition. At the same time, the loss of control over its own creation reaches a critical point when the caretaker's son escapes the narration. Thus, the reader confronts a situation of metafictional comicalness that challenges the conception of traditional literary construction: the realms of fictionality and reality are intermingled in order to mock the reader's expectations. As Schmitz points out, "the narrator is relentlessly manifest (...) and what he stresses in his narrative is primarily its contrivance" (1974: 210). In fact, the fragmented sections that conform different storylines, and that are also the narrator's plaything, can be easily observed. They conform a combination of narrative options that deny each other and rely on the capacity of a subject to unify it. In other words, readers have to interpret the purpose of those fragments and connect them in order to reach a final and coherent plot. In his story, Wineapple explains that "Coover plays with the many possibilities and alternatives

⁷ The name of Auster is a parodic fictional projection of the real writer, a demolition of its old control and supremacy.

contained within language and narrative structures” (1979: 66) and that is why “the story becomes all the meanings accrued” (1979: 70).

Other cases of this postmodernist revision on subjectivity can also be seen in Pynchon’s. Bukowski speaks about how, in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, readers can find the fragmentation of subjectivity that Oedipa —the protagonist— experiences when she realizes that her modernist vision and sensibility does not correspond to the postmodern, disruptive and open environment that surrounds her (2014: 8). “She becomes paranoid”, Bukowski says, “because she realizes not only that she does not have control over the world but that there may be other people or structures which have control over her subjectivity” (2014: 8). The book is constructed over different storylines: it presents a main plot, while other mysterious stories lurk beneath it. They are demonstrated as soon as Oedipa encounters strange signs along the narration, which makes her question her perception over the world and what it conceals. On its part, Tyson remarks how these signs are for Oedipa “cultural productions, offsprings of the American Dream”, which she wants “to decipher (...) so that she can know, not only the culture in which she lives, but her own subjectivity as well” (1994: 87). Pynchon’s book poses the ontological concern of many postmodernist texts. Thus, his character embodies the quandary of subjectivity and control in postmodernist literature, and the readers must deal with the consequences of this parallel presentation of the plot(s). “Readers must construct a different relationship to it, mapping its paradigms and narrative strategies but then choosing selectively which ones to pursue, engage with, and (re)organize” (Yaszek, 2013: 50). Pynchon presents a book with no defined ending or interpretation, since it is the reader who must consider which reading is the most proper or logical.

In conclusion, the problematization of the notion of subjectivity has been central in both modernist and postmodernist literature. The writers of these periods developed certain innovative and disruptive literary techniques in order to reinvent the concepts of “author” and “reader”. They pushed the author-person into the background and empowered the reader, which began to lose its position of passive spectator. This tendency towards the demystification of the author would later be also treated by the digital literature, as it will be explained in the following section.

2.2 Electronic literature: new mediums for literary production

The electronic literature, which firstly appeared in the eighties, is an interesting topic of study in relation to the problem of subjectivity. The digital medium in which it is created reflects the future of the postmodernist concerns about literary production, because it promotes new interfaces of communication and construction that favor the inclusion of the reader within the literary work. Thus, it is possible to find innovative techniques and strategies that respond to the features of this particular platform.

In the following sections, a brief discussion on the postmodern heritage of electronic literature will be given, since it demonstrates the continuation of the problem of subjectivity during the last decades of the 20th century (2.2.1). Moreover, a description of electronic literature and its different categories will also be needed (2.2.2), in order to secure basic concepts in regards to the following explanations. The question of the material medium in which these texts are created will also be discussed, because it is essential to comprehend the differences that it poses in regard to the print paradigm of traditional literature, and the repositioning of authors and readers (2.2.3).

2.2.1 The postmodernist heritage

Technology has played a major role in the fields of artistic production. Thus, its mere nature and structures have impregnated the way literature is created. In consequence, it continues the postmodernist literary legacy: the breaking of standardized codes, formal structures of literary composition and the new conceptions about the authorial voice and the reader's position within the text. Viires explains that certain characteristics of postmodernist writing are repeated in cyberliterature:

“text endings are omitted, the texts lack concrete structure, opening and end, or are circular in that the end refers to the beginning; fragmentariness, eclecticism, intertextuality, obscuration and disappearance of genre limits (...) are embedded in texts and presented by means of technological (and postmodernist, in contents) solutions” (2005: 156-157)

But other things establish the electronic literature as a postmodern heritage: for example, the importance of the code within the system of communication. If postmodernism was concerned with it and how it tried —and failed— to report reality, digital literature rescues

the problematic of the digital code and the new technological language that computers use. Talking about the concepts of “speech”, “writing” and “code”, Hayles says:

“these three major systems for creating signification interact with each other in millions of encounters every day. (...) Now that the information age is well advanced, we urgently need nuanced analyses of the overlaps and discontinuities of code with the legacy systems of speech and writing” (2005: 39).

The evolution of communications and technologies has generated an outburst of theories in relation to linguistics and language. The structure of computational language created a theoretic hole in the constitution of narratologies, something that different scholars tried to explain, as it is Hayles's case, with saussurean and derridian theories. The importance of code and its relation with the material reality is what directly relates part of Derrida's grammatology to the nature of computers. It can be observed, therefore, how computational language is similarly studied under the basis of human language: both are carriers of meaning with the purpose of transmitting information.

2.2.2 What is electronic literature? Definition and typology

In his book *Electronic literature: new horizons for the literary*, Hayles collects the Electronic Literature Organization's definition: “work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer” (Hayles, 2010: 3). In other words, it is a text whose existence and potentiality rely on the digital medium in which it is created.

Regarding its genres, Hayles explains that hypertext⁸ fiction was the first one to make its appearance in the literary panorama (2010: 6). They are works that rely on connected nodes of information, which are ready to be used and rearranged by the reader/users in order to create different stories. They were written in storyspace, a software that allows people to create hypertext fiction throughout a vast number of links. This points out to a new interactive creativity that involves the action and desires of the reader as it never happened before. Within this active participation, other sub-categories have also been

⁸ “A term used since 1965 in the discussion of computerized text, now referring to the realm of electronically interlinked texts and multimedia resources found on the World Wide Web (from 1990) and on CD-ROM reference sources. Hypertext is sometimes distinguished from ‘linear’ printed texts in terms of the reader's changed experience of moving around and among texts” (Baldick, 2008: 161).

established. Travis —as Hayles (2010), who quotes Ryan’s (2006) taxonomy— differentiates between two assumed types of hypertexts: the exploratory or constructive (1996: 121). In an analysis about Joyce’s⁹ (1991) terminology, Travis explains that

“when Joyce uses the term *exploratory*, he refers to hypertext that limits the reader’s agency to freedom of movement among the narrative paths, while *constructive* hypertext permits the reader structurally to alter the text. In constructive hypertext the reader can function as a writer” (1996: 121).

Hayles explains that the second “genre” began when the electronic literature moved to the Web (2010: 6). The net went a step further in the implication of the user, creating a huge network of information that connects different readers. With the arrival of the Internet, this new variation of electronic literature responded to a wider concept of subjective restructuring: in the World Wide Web, the readers/users enjoy in a much extended sense the problems and possibilities of cooperative action: they pour out their images, sounds or texts into webpages that harbor them, creating a nucleus of information that any reader/writer can manipulate (as it happens in literary blogs, for example).

With the passing of time and the evolution of hypertext, Hayles finally recounts some other minor varieties of electronic literature, which she defines as mutations of the first genre. Some of these are narratives constructed from a collection of data repositories, or the one known as picaresque hypertext, among others (2010: 7). On the other hand, although she does not speak about it, there is another type of digital literature that deserves mention: the computer-generated texts. They also form part of this evolution, because readers rely on the computer’s development and capacity for constructing and reading entire novels or poems. Regarding the final texts originated by computers, it is interesting to mention Emerson’s (2008) debate about the literary/authorial quality of those texts. She quotes the poet Marc Adrian (1969), who spoke about the benefits of computer-generated texts:

“To me the neutrality of the machine is of great importance... it allows the spectator to find his own meanings in the association of words more easily, since their choice, size, and disposition are determined at random” (1969: 53 in Emerson, 2008: 46).

⁹ To not confound with James Joyce. Here, it is Michael Joyce, an important hypertext writer.

This way, computer-generated texts also points out to the evolution of the electronic literature into different branches, which contribute to the extension of the reader’s active role. The essence of the author changes radically, since it is almost completely erased from the final result; the “author” is only in charge of the computer’s programmable software.

2.2.3 The medium’s materiality and the reader’s new responsibilities

The material aspects of the artistic medium in the digital era play a major role in the creation of the new responsibilities and possibilities that digital literature encourage. Hayles, for example, says that “to think of text on screen as essentially identical to text on a printed page (...) is all the more seductive”, but that it is important “to recognize that the computer can simulate so successfully only because it differs profoundly from print in its physical properties and dynamic processes” since “writers of electronic literature and texts become more adept at exploring the medium’s specificity” (2004: 71).

Referring to hypertexts, Viires explains that the term “interactive reading” has been used to referring the readers’ new role within the digital panorama: “A work of cyberliterature presented as a hypertext would be first and foremost characterised by links connecting blocks of texts. A reader follows these links and makes choices. (...) This way the reader becomes an author” (2005: 157). But this new role responds also to the medium in which the material is created, and it is important to emphasize the changes that the material medium offers to both print and digital paradigms. Peovic attaches a clarifying table with the main differences between them:

	PRINT PARADIGM	DIGITAL-NETWORK PARADIGM	
		DIGITAL PARADIGM	THE NET
Formal characteristics	Fixed, linear, uni-formed.	Flexibility, “flickering signifier”	Distributed diagram, “distributed signifier”
Economy of the text/ self/ virtual world	Standardized industrial production, distribution and consummation.	Self-production, DIY culture.	The Net as a distribution channel used by and tailored for network users.

(Peovic, 2014: 33).

Table 2. Differences between the print and digital paradigms

It can be observed that the material aspects of both paradigms (print/digital) is the source of their consequent formal characteristics. Whereas the print paradigm relies on the limitation of the paper, the digital-network paradigm enjoys the limitless of the digital/web. The first one (i.e. book) is the result of a massive production that offers a closed product to the readership. Its reading will always be the same; the disposition of the words or pages will never be transformed. Their plots also tend to be fixed, linear and monologic texts, and the reader's participation is reduced to extract the meaning from those closed structures. As it can be observed in the table, the second one can be altered constantly by the reader, and in some aspects —as it happens in the net— it will never reach an end. Flexibility becomes the key point in the basis of the digital paradigm and, in a broader sense, this flexibility reaches its maximum when studying the Net (World Wide Web) and its possibilities.

The main factor that contributes to these changes is the appearance of a new aspect in the construction of the work: the “self-production”, on one hand, entails a cooperative action of the reader/user in manipulating those texts. On the other hand, the digital text or multimedia work is enriched by the number of subjectivities that collaborate on it. Yellowlees explains the reasons why this second paradigm evolves, and he clearly defines what makes the digital paradigm different from the print one:

“one of the purposes driving interactive narratives (...) is the desire for the inexhaustible story, the mystery that unspools with a fresh cast of suspects instead of gliding quickly through its denouement to a limited conclusion” (2003: 13).

In consequence, this approach towards the collaboration with a machine has resulted in a new terminology. Some scholars speak about the “embodiment” of the electronic device within the human cognition. It makes reference to the collaborative actions between humans and machines, and points out to the problems of the technological adaptation into the human body and mind, with its subsequent alterations. Hayles, after a debate regarding the problems of the technological advances in relation to human cognitivism, finally concludes that:

“Embodiment will not become obsolete because it is essential to human being, but it can and does transform in relation to environmental selective pressures, particularly through interactions with technology” (2010: 104).

These transformations lead the theoretical field on the human/reader's subjectivity into a new realm: within the digital paradigm, the reader "becomes" a new entity that can explore technological code and its representation. This new embodiment is the responsible for the conception of the reader as a posthuman being: an entity conformed by both human and technological elements. Apart from cyberpunk and cyberbodies, Featherstone and Burrows include also cyberliterature as responsible for this change in the human subjectivity. For them, the cyberspace is constructed over a projected image of its users and a vast amount of digital information, which points out to a parallel reality where the user's personality is altered and strengthened (1996: 5-7). As Carassai explains,

"the new type of study introduced by cybernetics had a significant role in undermining the stability of humanist ideas on subjectivity (...) The process would obviously affect the posthuman subject's literary representation in terms of narrative voice" (2009: 2).

Thus, the reader of electronic literature crosses a limit that was fixed by the print paradigm, due to the new creative possibilities that the digital medium offers. The interactivity that characterizes electronic literature explains this new conception of the posthuman subject, which also defines the reconstruction of the reader's concept and role.

Raley explains that hypertext fiction is "generally organized in units called nodes or packets and interconnected through links (...) [it] is stationed upon the problem of itself as a discrete form of textuality" (2001: 2). As a consequence of this structure of interconnected links, the figure of the classical author in electronic literature is challenged, and the hypertext requires the intervention of the reader for constructing the narrative. Landow (1994) created the term "wreader"¹⁰, which indicates the role of the reader in hypertext literature. In hypertexts, subjectivity is polymorphic and open: although there is an author, the enormous intervention of the reader/user in the creation of meaning blurs the borders between these traditional literary concepts. The reader arises in a medium where "textual openness, intertextuality, multivocality, decentering, and rhizomatic, nonlinear structures" (Ensslin, 2007: 31) are the core of literary creation. As Landow also points out, "the figure of the hypertext author approaches, even if it does not merge with, that of the reader; the functions of the reader and writer become more deeply

¹⁰ This term comprehends the two terms "writer" and "reader", establishing the new role that the electronic format offers to the reader/user.

entwined than ever before” (2006: 125). There exists a redefinition of the subject, which achieves a new function when dealing with the digital medium and the elements there offered for their recomposition. This active participation will mark a precedent in the conception of the authorial figure. Regarding Glazier’s (2001) *Digital Poetics: Hypertext, Visual-Kinetic Text and Writing in Programmable Media*, Hayles recovers his main ideas about the issue:

“electronic literature is best understood as a continuation of experimental print literature. (...) The medium lends itself to experimental practice, especially to forms that disrupt traditional notions of stable subjectivities and ego-centered discourses” (2010: 17).

This is what happens in Shelley Jackson's hypertextual work *Patchwork Girl*. In her book *My mother was a computer*, Hayles remarks how *Patchwork Girl* threatens the tenets of eighteenth century concept of subjectivity, which is supposed to belong to one single individual. “For the female monster, it is mere common sense to say that multiple subjectivities inhabit the same body, for the different creatures from whose parts she is made retain their distinctive personalities, making her an assemblage rather than a unified self” (2005: 148). The compound of subjectivities, therefore, respond again to the problem of the authorial voice, an issue that seems to evolve from the 20th century to the more recent technological studies, interested in the utilization of codes, computational language and narratology. Van der Klei explains how

“in the presence of hypertext, there is a differentiation of links to be brought out, and not a repetition (...) With this reading tool, the “difference-reader” seizes what is at stake in the text, once it is hypertextualized, and jumps from one link of the rhizome to another” (2002: 52-53).

The emphasis on the non-linearity, on the attack of hierarchical structures and modes of subjectivization is therefore the core of the hypertexts’ functioning, which now have favored the evolution towards new relationships and experiences outside classical authorial figures. The leap from traditional, printed literature to the digital one was an extreme impact in the way authors and readers are conceptualized. Thus, it can be concluded that the electronic format promoted a new role of the reader as creator, where the literary work responded to the new conception of subjectivity behind the narratological component of the text.

3. William Burroughs and the instability of subjectivity

William Burroughs (1914-1997) was a well-known American writer and member of the so-called Beat Generation. His works are characterized by the extreme experimentation they present. Among others, his most famous novels are *Junky* (1953) and *Naked Lunch* (1959), which are still praised as an example of innovative literature. Nevertheless, it is the *Nova Trilogy* and his “word-virus” theory what will be analyzed in the following sections (3.3 and 3.4), because they are representative of the instability of subjectivity that has been previously mentioned (2.1 and 2.2). Before the analysis, a brief discussion on Burroughs’s position within the literary movements of the 20th century will be given (3.1), since he seems to reflect the modern and postmodern concerns on the question of literary subjectivity. Moreover, a succinct section on his visionary aesthetic is going to be needed (3.2), in order to demonstrate how his *Nova Trilogy* gathers not only the postmodernist concerns, but also ideas about future digital narratologies.

3.1 William Burroughs and his place in the literary periodization

Regarding Burroughs’s position within postmodernism, there is still an open debate about it. It is difficult to classify his work, since it is also difficult to completely separate modernism and postmodernism, as it has been previously explained (2.1). William Burroughs began to play with the limits and potentiality of the authorial, narrative voice. His name is usually recorded as one of the most influential postmodernist authors, but some others think that his work as a pioneer of the postmodernist movement. Certainly, Burroughs’s techniques do shape later literary resources, but the time in which he operated was outside theoretical conceptions of postmodernism. Authors like Hoffman position the postmodernist movement from the sixties onwards, a period that

“confirms both the liberating and the deconstructive drives in culture, not, however, by reflecting lifestyle, civil right movements, or new politics, but by an exuberant creation of new work, a playful and ironic attitude, and a decomposition of its own traditional logic of cohesion and integration” (2005: 33)

In consequence, Burroughs’s early work does not find its place within the postmodernist movement due to reasons of temporality. On the other hand, it is important to consider that his oeuvre covers different decades. In the case of the *Nova Trilogy* —published in

different years along the sixties—, Burroughs could be included as one of many postmodernist authors. Though the main technique used in this trilogy (i.e. the *cut-up* method) resembles modernist aesthetics (*collage*, cubism), the subversion of his narrative or the restructuration of subjective control over the text do connect with the postmodernist tenets that were affecting the growing culture of the sixties. Jameson, for example, also related the emerging and insubordinated American counter-culture with Burroughs's novels (1985: 111).

On the contrary, other theorists preferred to situate Burroughs outside both modernist and postmodernist movements: Murphy, for example, baptizes Burroughs as an “amodern” writer, an “alternative to (post)modernism” that “rejects both the constitutive asymmetries of modernist myth-mongering and the postmodern abandonment of critique” (1997: 29). Nevertheless, to consider postmodernism an apolitical movement is something that other authors also dismiss. Dekoven acknowledges “the blatancy of self-contradiction in Burroughs's work and thought” which, she says, “makes him an ideal marker of the dominant modern/emergent postmodern sixties” (2004: 307). But she vehemently rejects the idea that postmodernism lacks any political critique and, in consequence, that Burroughs's work cannot be included within this literary movement for such reasons.

Thus, Burroughs's position within the literary panorama is something that has not reached a conclusion yet. But one thing remains obvious: part of his work envisages the later postmodernist techniques that will mark a precedent in digital/electronic literary creation. If not fully postmodernist, Burroughs influences the still-to-come postmodernist authors of the sixties and seventies, who will continue developing the decentering of the authorial figure, the restructuration and reconfiguration of the plot and the subversion of classical narrative genres. What is more, he can be considered a visionary of the electronic novel, because the strategies he imagined are fictional formulations of what is going to become a fact in digital narratologies.

3.2 *Nova Trilogy* and the scope of the technological dream

“What has made Burroughs an increasingly essential reference point for twentieth-century culture”, says Punday, “are the links he insisted on between writing and other media” (2007: 33). In the *Nova Trilogy* —which will be analyzed in the following

sections—, the reader’s position in relation to the text, and the attempt of these anti-narratives to break the authorial mind-control throughout technological means represents a new different way of writing literature. Burroughs shows a clear interest in the restructuration and recategorization of words and linguistic structures (3.3), so it is possible to suppose that he could be aware of the progresses in computational linguistics and generativism¹¹. His conception of technology —multimedia devices, posthuman subjects— and its effects on the reader’s subjectivity could have been a source of inspiration for later genres, such as e-literatures. But although it is not possible to establish a direct relation between both, it is interesting to point out Burroughs’s visionary ideas.

Firstly, Burroughs’s characters embody the posthuman subject that may be in charge of the reaffirmation of a new subjectivity. The “soft machine”, which for Burroughs is the human body, is aligned with a new conception of the human being (in relation to the problem of the human body in Burroughs’s imagery see also Wood, 1996). It resembles the actual reader of the electronic literature, whose body and mind work cooperatively with new software of literary production. Regarding Burroughs’s style in previous novels —especially in *Naked Lunch*—, Johnston points out how Burroughs already sketches the “essentials of a prototypical assemblage and machinic novel” (1998: 23). Later on, he points out to the materialization of the “writing machine”, a burroughsian concept explained in *The Ticket That Exploded* (from now on, *Ticket*). It seems of big importance in Johnston’s analysis on Burroughs’s attempt to end bodily parasitism and the propagation of the “word-virus”. The most interesting part is found in *Ticket*, page 51. There, it is explained the methods of literary production that can be achieved throughout the “writing machine”, which resembles the actual technology used to generate texts automatically:

“A writing machine that shifts one half one text and half the other through a page frame on conveyor belts — (The proportion of half one text half the other is important corresponding as it does to the two halves of the human organism) Shakespeare, Rimbaud, etc. permutating through page frames in constantly changing juxtaposition the machine spits out books and plays and poems — The spectators are invited to feed into the machine any pages of their own text in fifty-fifty juxtaposition

¹¹ During the sixties, generativism and engineering cooperated in order to develop new softwares able to translate and generate texts automatically. In this decade, there were created some prototypes that could have inspired Burroughs to imagine his “writing machine”.

with any author of their choice any pages of their choice and provided with the result in a few minutes” (*Ticket*, 51)

Secondly, Burroughs asks the readers to question their passive role, and it is through a strong exposure to technology and multimedia that the disruption of a linear textual message can be achieved. As it will be later explained, his characters are exposed to a juxtaposition of multimedia aesthetics and techniques —film, audio and image—; their actions are dictated throughout theatrical scripts; their lives are written as films by the *reality studio*. Moreover, manuscripts are embedded within the book, which highlights Burroughs’s purpose in integrating images into the narration. The *cut-up* method, with its daring fragmentations and elaboration of symbols, typographies, “sounds”, “videos”, words and structures, evoke the electronic literature, which also uses all these elements. It is possible to establish a connection with Burroughs’s *Nova Trilogy* and the textures, strategies and forms of electronic texts: what Burroughs’s oeuvre illustrates is the anteroom of a still-to-come machine that can make real, outside the boundaries of the printed book, a whole combination of audio, video, image and text, and which is a reality nowadays.

In conclusion, William Burroughs’s position as author in *Nova Trilogy* is not far from that in the current electronic literature. It helps to comprehend the dissolution of the author and the progressive inclusion of the reader in new digital narratologies. Burroughs’s techniques, with their multimedia aesthetics, envisioned the conception of the absent digital author, as well as the empowerment of the reader as response to that absence.

3.3 The “word-virus” and the *cut-up*: Burroughs’s main beliefs about language

One of Burroughs’s most important worries was the conception of the language as a parasite that was settled within ourselves. It would be in his essay *The electronic revolution* (1970) where he would explain the basis of his theories and the methods of literary creation. In his view, he wrote, “the word has not been recognized as a virus because it has achieved a state of stable symbiosis with the host” (2005: 5). Thus, he considered that the perpetuation of this symbiosis between word (virus) and human (host) creates a bond of meanings that maintain our liberty of interpretation and creation at stake.

The word as a virus was identified with the “Other Half”¹² of our organism: it refers to the space controlled by the word within us. The other part, also called “Other Half” belongs to the rest of our organism, which is free from the virus. The potentiality of language is reduced due to the strict semantic and syntactic boundaries that the hosts have accepted. Burroughs proposed the alteration of this undesirable state by changing the code and meanings that are given to us from the machinery of control (i.e. socio-political structures that conform our subjectivities). During a series of interviews, Burroughs gave his opinion about the use of the word and its possible reformulations, which looks for the liberation from the structures of control:

“The word of course is one of the most powerful instruments of control as exercised by the newspapers and images as well, there are both words and images in newspapers... not if you start cutting these up and rearranging them you are breaking down the control system” (Burroughs and Odier, 1989: 33).

Thus, he proposed a way of dismantling the structures that conform human language. The *cut-up* method—the main tool in constructing the *Nova Trilogy*—, was closely related with the media and electronic devices and, as Hassan says, is used with the purpose of “cut oneself out of language, cut oneself from language (...) [in order to] escape a world made by words and perhaps to discover another” (1963: 9). The *cut-up* method was a technique imported from the pictorial field, and it had reminiscences of the collage that early modernists had tried to bring into language. It would be his friend and painter Brion Gysin the one who would introduce Burroughs to it:

“Method is simple: take a page or more or less of your own writing or from any writer living or dead. Any written or spoken words. Cut into sections with scissors or switch blade as preferred and rearrange the sections. Looking away. Now write the result... Applications of cut up method are literally unlimited cut out from time limits. Old world lines keep you in old worlds slots. Cut your way out” (Burroughs 1961: 105 in Hassan, 1963: 9).

The use of tape-recorders became essential in the development of the *cut-up* method. Burroughs experimented a lot with them and he reflected this interest also in literary works like *Nova Trilogy*, where the method is explained several times. The alteration of

¹² When speaking about “symbiosis”, Burroughs refers to two halves: the “word” and the “body”.

tape-recorders were thought to break any message, especially the political and commercial ones that were given to the population uncritically. Burroughs cared a lot about the “manipulation” practiced by the mass media, and he thought that the same experiments that big companies and the government did with videos or pictorial collages could be also used against the Establishment. This would permit the search for new paths towards the liberation of the passive citizen. In *The Electronic Revolution*, Burroughs explained the method for this manipulation:

“We now have three tape recorders. So we will make a simple word-virus. Let us suppose that our target is a rival politician. On tape recorder 1 we will record speeches and conversation carefully editing in stammers mispronouncing, inept phrases (...) on tape recorder 2 we will make so a love tape by bugging his bed room. (...) On tape recorder 3 we will record hateful disapproving voices and splice the three recordings together at very short intervals and play them back to the senator and his constituents. This cutting and playback can be very complex involving speech scramblers and batteries of tape recorders but THE BASIC PRINCIPAL IS SIMPLY SPLICING SEX TAPE AND DISAPPROVAL TAPES IN TOGETHER. Once the associations lines are established they are activated every time the senator’s speech centres are activated (...) So his teen age daughter crawls all over him while Texas rangers and decent church going women rise from tape recorder 3 screaming “WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN FRONT OF DECENT PEOPLE.” The teenage daughter is just a refinement. Basically all you need is sex recordings on number 2 and hostile recordings on number 3” (2005: 7-8).

On the literary field, Burroughs compared the passivity of the citizen with that of the reader: he created a simile between both, and praised their liberation from any kind of authoritarian impositions. The written version of the *cut-up* method was supposed to work over arbitrariness, though in combination it responds to a final, concrete goal: to present a dismembered storyline for a reader that will never be constrained by a linear narrative or an authorial voice with clear personal associations. As Robinson says: “With cut-ups (...) the reader does not have to interact with these preordained authorial associations, and can instead bring their own word-association to the text” (2011: 56). Once linearity has disappeared, the reader constructs its way throughout the novels and the different sections they present, in the way they find more suitable. Thus, as automatic writing and

other earlier techniques, the *cut-up* contributes to the development of the reader's own subjectivity.

Resuming the contagion of the “word-virus”, Burroughs posed two more different problems: the incapacity to be “silent” —to shut off the internal voice that provokes our stream of thoughts—, and the perpetuation of fixed identities. Regarding the first one, Land exposes how “[word-virus] operates as an external ‘other’ that colonizes the body, forcing it to sub-vocalize and thereby reproducing itself” (2005: 455). In other words, the stream of thoughts (i.e. the sub-vocalization within the human mind) was inevitably ruled by the limitations of the “word-virus” because this inner voice constituted a coherent system of meanings, this is, the conventional language. Due to the fact that sub-vocalizations cannot be so easily manipulated as written language (*cut-up*) Burroughs thought that the solution came by altering the fixed system of meanings, something that needs time because conventions need to be destroyed first. This could also solve the second problem: the stagnation of identity affected by language. According again to Land, this stream of thoughts within ourselves is what “produces an all-too-human sense of identity and self-continuity” (2005: 455). In *The Electronic Revolution*, Burroughs poses the question of identity regarding language:

“When I say to be me, to be you, to be myself, to be others- whatever I may be called upon to be or to say that I am- I am not the verbal label “myself.” The word BE in the English language contains, as a virus contains, its precoded message of damage, the categorical imperative of permanent condition” (2005: 34).

In conclusion, the recurrent use of the *cut-up* method aims at restructuring subjectivity, identity and communication. Modifying the linguistic structures, there is a challenge to the order imposed and new possible realities can be recreated. The *Nova Trilogy*, analyzed in the following section, is representative of the aforementioned ideas on the “word-virus” and the *cut-up*. In these books, Burroughs uses this last strategy in order to present the reader a new time of decomposition and “reconfiguration”; to show the possibilities from the demystification of the author/empowerment of the reader, a topic that strengthens in later postmodernist works. As Yebra explains, in Burroughs's writings the words lose their position as tools of manipulation, and they become combative weapons against the

hegemonic narrative tradition that ruled over the previous centuries, and that constituted strong and fixed definitions of authorial subjectivity (2011: 4).

3.4 The *Nova Trilogy*: the performance of the *cut-up*

Although Burroughs developed his *cut-up* technique in different novels, the *Nova Trilogy* remains as the final attempt to reconfigure the traditional conception of the linear, controlled plot. As Cran says, Burroughs's novels "cannot be said to begin or end, or even to run in sequence" (2014: 90). These novels rather perform a displaced narrative discontinuity that feeds its purpose of reintegrating the reader's action in the consideration and interpretation of the text. For this purpose, Burroughs uses a series of "images" and fragments of texts that echo the collapse of traditional ways of subjectivization due to the arrival of new media and technologies. He relies on the presentation of fragmented plots that aim to achieve a grade of amazement in the traditional reader, who will not be able to remain passive towards what he/she is reading because of the alteration that the text has suffered. In order to achieve that, "the elusive, quasi-narrator plays no role in guiding the reader through the linguistic wire in which the action takes place" (Cran, 2014: 91). The reader is the one supposed to gather what is happening in a mixture of places, actions and stories.

The *cut-up* method is presented in different ways; usually, it is easily recognizable due to some formal marks, though sometimes it is camouflaged. Some of the most visible marks are dashes (—), ellipsis (...), blank spaces and oblique bars (/) that sometimes appear in groups of two (//) or three (///). In order to facilitate the reading, references about the books will be given abbreviated: *Soft* for *The Soft Machine*; *Ticket* for *The Ticket that Exploded* and *Nova* for *Nova Express*. Examples of the aforementioned uses can be found along the whole trilogy: dashes in *Soft*, 9; ellipsis in *Ticket*, 94; blank spaces in *Nova*, 61 and oblique bars in *Nova*, 139. Nevertheless, as it was said before, there are cases where the *cut-up* method is not easily distinguishable due to the lack of any sign. Thus, the fragments of the *cut-up* can only be recognized if the reader knows the texts beforehand. Such is the case of T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, which verses (underlined for this analysis) are divided and mixed up with other texts:

“Through all the streets no relief—I will show you fear on walls and windows people and sky—Wo weilest du?—Harry up please its accounts—Empty is the third who walks beside you—Thin mountain air here and there and out the window—Put on a clean shirt and dusk through narrow streets—Whiffs of my Spain from vacant lots—Brandy neat—April wind revolving lips and pants—After dinner sleep dreaming on rain—The soldier gives no shelter—War of dead sun is a handful of dust—Thin and tenuous in gray shivering mist of old Western movies said: ‘Fill your hand, Martin’” (*Nova*, 115).

Other times, the reader finds the repetition of words, sentences or fragments that appear throughout the whole trilogy. Regarding words, one of the most interesting kind of repetition is the one that affects proper names, because there is also a game of references. There are names that reappear through the novels: *Ali* (*Ticket*, 29; *Nova*, 115); *Kiki* (*Ticket*, 83; *Nova*, 153; *Soft*, 32); *K9* (*Soft*, 33; *Nova*, 84), *Bill* (*Nova*, 106; *Soft*, 21), among others. As a curiosity, Burroughs also introduces his name in the narration (*Nova*, 176), emphasizing the authorial destabilization that he praises by levelling ontologically the role of the creator with that of the fictional construction.

In relation to the repetition of sentences, it is interesting to observe those cases in which there is also a change in the typography. This abrupt change isolates these sentences from the rest of the narration, and it gives them a particular “sound”. Probably, Burroughs found this appropriate in order to reproduce in text the effects of audio manipulation. In these manipulations, as it has been previously explained (3.3), it is usual to find different audios with different textures, which contribute to destabilize the original message. Two examples of this kind of repetition are: “*Hey Rube!!*” (*Nova*, 20-21) and “*Belt her*” (*Nova*, 102-103). Regarding fragments, two particular examples can be found in different books:

“The Nature of Begging
Need? — Lack
Want? — Need
Life? — Death.”

(*Ticket*, 28 and *Nova*, 93)

Other structures repeat with certain variants along the books: “Word falling—Photo falling—Break through in Grey Room” (*Nova*, 62; *Soft*, 108) and “‘Love’ is falling — Sex word is falling” (*Ticket*, 81).

Moreover, the use of different symbols, letter size, styles and manuscripts are also of major importance. They contribute to create different textures, which show the disruption of the text. Thus, the book is enriched by a series of formal techniques that evoke the crossover of different artistic fields. Burroughs uses italics (*Nova*, 121), bold letters (*Ticket*, 15), randomizes the use of capital letters (*Ticket*, 37; *Nova*, 59 and *Soft*, 24), writes in Morse (*Nova*, 65) and includes the image of a manuscript (*Ticket*, 158). In addition, he pastes question (*Nova*, 164, 169 or 172) and exclamation marks (*Ticket*, 16, 37) when unnecessary.

As the *cut-up* method implies working with language, it is interesting to make a succinct analysis of linguistic aspects. According to Johnston, the *Nova Trilogy* had constant revision on Burroughs's part (1998: 23). Consequently, it is probable that the author wanted to leave ungrammatical constructions and other kind of linguistic mistakes on purpose.

Burroughs knew that the reader always has an interiorized grammar that will allow it to, for example, recategorize words in order to make them fit into a pre-established syntactical scheme. Such is the case in: "John Citizen come up with a load of oo buckshot into your soft and tenders or Johnny Law just happens by" (*Soft*, 86). Paradoxically, the author tries to destroy conventions with the *cut-up*, but counts on readers' conventions on grammar to build up new meanings. Here, the words "Citizen" and "Law" could be reinterpreted by the reader as surnames, due to an orthographic convention (surnames starts with capital letters) and a syntactical scheme related to nominal appositions (when two nouns appear juxtaposed, one of them complements the other). Furthermore, "oo" does not mean anything, but even if it has no meaning, the reader can put it into a syntactical scheme that labels "oo" as an adjective. In addition, Burroughs constructs a sentence that is grammatically correct but it collapses because of semantic constraints. In "Johnny Law just happens by", the verb "happens" is well inflected, but it rejects a subject that is animated (because animated beings cannot "happen"). Here are other examples where Burroughs plays with the morphological categories and syntactical structures—as Gertrude Stein was doing half a century before—: "Smear it on—Smear it in —Johnny me—I Johnny" (*Soft*, 59), "I found 'Genial' in the police" (*Ticket*, 23).

Other strategy that Burroughs follows is the blending of languages, especially English with Spanish. He does not seem to construct sentences following the Spanish grammar,

but he inserts Spanish words into English syntactical structures: “No good no bueno” (*Nova*, 29); “Como eso I fuck you” (*Soft*, 85). At other times, as merging languages as only in English, he maintains the ungrammaticality in the verbal flexion: “William tu es loco” (*Nova*, 22); “You is coming Johnny?” (*Soft*, 84) and “Rats was running the post” (*Soft*, 30). Finally, a recurrent strategy is the juxtaposition of elements in which ellisions must be interpreted by the reader: “No me hagas while you wait” (*Nova*, 22); “Fluck flick take any place. Johnny you-me-neon-asshole-amigos-now” (*Soft*, 74); “No good borracho son bitch bastard” (*Soft*, 55); “We smoke fuck sleep O.K. Muy got good one Johnny” (*Soft*, 59). This allows the reader to develop its own interpretation, because it fills the gaps freely with the most appropriate words.

Burroughs also blends habitual filmic techniques with literary ones. Flashbacks without previous introduction are told in an endless stream of words, which also lack punctuation. They recall the unexpected images of a film that create a bond of associations between one scene and the other thanks to the load of information they present in one single shot. If film makes use of image in order to create a logical temporality, Burroughs simply narrates the actions, describes the surroundings or the character’s thoughts, no matter where they happened. In Burroughs’s books it is reflected “how traditional narration is then intercut with filmic descriptions to effect a Burroughsian shift in audience reading expectation –film and novel merge in a challenge to either’s hierarchical social status in society’s narratives” (Baldwin, 2000: 75). The way the text is presented acquires a new nature in which image and cinematic narrative are the core of this new form of representation that protects “the soft machine” (i.e. the human body) from a “constant siege from a vast hungry host of parasites [i.e. the assumed meanings of language]” (*Soft*, 130). Thus, it is remarkable how the link between writing and other media becomes the core of Burroughs’s work (Punday, 2007: 33).

In *Nova Trilogy*, life is equalized to a film: Burroughs points out to the possibilities of a made-up reality, as far as tape-recorders and videos are also possibly manipulated. He presents the reader’s/citizen’s role within a pre-conceived and subjective reality: humans are passive subjects, moved by the information (i.e. images, sounds, texts) that comes from the machinery of control. The images described or the perpetuation of a filmic description of reality is the result of different sources of power that are in control of those projections (i.e. the *reality studio*). Thus, he describes both film and life as “[instruments]

and [weapons] of monopoly” (*Ticket*, 117). Nevertheless, they can be avoided in order to “find out how it feels to be outside the film.” (*Ticket*, 117). As a film script, the book contains parts with stage directions for the characters (as it can be observed in *Nova*, 98). In page 118 of *Ticket*, for example, the description of the environment and the character’s actions seem to have been taken out of a cinema or theatrical script. At other times, it is narrated how reality is perceived “in slow-motion flashes” (*Ticket*, 120) because, it must not be forgotten, “what we see is dictated by what we hear. (...) The sound track conjures up the image track – Word came before image” (*Ticket*, 131). The pictures are created out of language, which imposes Burroughs’s multimedia tendency.

On the other hand, the blending of different artistic mediums will also be recovered in the content and plot of the trilogy. Burroughs uses metafictional tools to equalize the character’s reality to a film. Thus, in the *Nova Trilogy* Burroughs conceives the *reality studio*: a material studio where reality is supposed to be produced. Through images, sounds or texts, reality becomes a made-up construct that has to be exported and imposed over the population —via television, radio or newspapers—. Its counterpart, of course, comprehends literature and the closed system of significations that is presented to the readers. Burroughs’s solution to that imposition remains on its methods of production: throughout the alteration of the filmic mechanisms that conform this reality —or the artificial connections presented by authors in their books—, he praises the liberty of the reader in dismissing and restructuring that artificial reality.

For example, in *Ticket*, a group of priests use the Mayan calendar in order to brainwash and control the slaves. The perpetuation of this system has one main goal: assure the priests’ privileged position in society. On the contrary, the slaves are convinced of the veracity of their reality: they do not question it. Defining the slaves as recipients of that amount of manipulated information, Burroughs is pointing out to the passive and vulnerable reader who also accepts the reality and ideas expressed by the author. The key is in the construction of these three books: the fragmentation points out to this incipient rebellion towards the accepted modes of subjectivization and interpretation. They have to be overcome, and Burroughs invites his readers to exercise that new capacity.

The *Nova Trilogy* is intrinsically related with Burroughs’s theories about the “word-virus”, because the same processes of language restructuring (i.e. *cut-up*) are used by the characters. In addition, image and audio are included as an essential component of a

film, pointing out to the multimedia domain that characterizes Burroughs's work. In consequence, these different artistic fields are intermingled and reshaped in order to escape the aforementioned *reality studio*, whose parasitic members are Mayan priests, aliens, metamorphosed creatures or the Nova Mob. As it has been previously explained in this section, Baldwin says that "implicit in Nova Express is a theory that what we call reality is actually a movie" (2000: 70). Thus, as a film, it can be manipulated and rewritten—different departments of the social structures are there to employ the language in their benefit (i.e. the "It-Never-Happened-Department")—. Regarding the assault against the established code, the protagonist Inspector Lee, in *The Soft Machine*, recounts the destruction of the priests' control over the population. He changes the code that is sent to the population by altering the machine that sends those messages. Consequently, he breaks the linguistic structures of mind-control:

"The error in enemy strategy is now obvious – It is a machine strategy and the machine can be redirected (...) A Technician learns to think and write in association blocks which can then be manipulated according to the laws of association and juxtaposition" (*Nova*, 85).

This premise instigates people to "Storm the Reality Studio and retake the universe" (*Soft*, 108) because, as Tietchen explains, "the Nova subject is (...) an empty container filled by external and dominating textual matter of the Reality Script" (2001: 113). This Reality Script functions as a film script that dictates our lives, and it is supposed to be controlled by groups like the Nova Mob. Hassan explains that "above all, [the Mob] uses the power of Word and Image to exercise its influence" (1963: 20). Throughout the *Nova Trilogy*, Burroughs expresses his thoughts about the role of the reader. Thus, as the Nova Mob has its tools for controlling the others' perception of the world, the author usually partakes in the control of the book's content and linearity. By instigating the reader to disconnect and dismember words and images, Burroughs aims to break the manipulation attached to controlled and fixed interpretations. Echoing his theory about the "word-virus" (3.3), Burroughs attacks the passivity of the reader, whose actions may contribute to a system of control in which language, as a virus enthroned by society/authors and its moral codes, spreads the illness from parents to sons, from readers to those other readers who may come.

On the other hand, it has to be pointed out how the representation of these groups of power (i.e. aliens, centipedes, etc) illustrate Burroughs's quest "to free himself and his readers from bondage to social and biological control" (Skerl, 1984: 124). This reconfiguration of images/entities aim to dismantle ready-made perceptions of reality; Burroughs wants his readers to realize that the re-creation of the world imposed upon them is possible. Thus, he points out to the existence of dislocated beings or entities (for example, in *Soft*, 40 and 56; *Ticket*, 59 and 79 and *Nova*, 56), whose descriptions are never fully given. The appreciation of their nature is, therefore, diminished, which contributes to destabilize the plot and the reader's formal conception of reality. One of the most remarkable examples could be the "nature" of the characters Mr. Bradly and Mr. Martin, whose names appear juxtaposed or mixed along the narration: "Me, Bradly-Martin, who invented the double cross" (*Soft*, 41), "'Mr. Bradly Mr. Martin' also known as 'The Ugly Spirit'" (*Nova*, 54) and "Shut off 'Mr. Bradly Mr. Apparent Because We Believe It'—Into air—You are yourself 'Mr. Bradly Mr. Other Identities'" (*Nova*, 175). Though they seem to be different, independent entities, Burroughs plays with their descriptions and the concept of reference.

Regarding the topic of identity, it is also interesting the presented conception about the human body as container of machinistic elements. In *Ticket*, page 126, Burroughs writes: "A tape recorder is an externalized section of the human nervous system". It clearly envisions the posthuman nature of new entities, whose subjectivity has to be reinvented as part of a new nature built upon technological advances within the human body. In fact, in the *Soft* appendix, Burroughs explains that "the soft machine is the human body under constant siege from a vast hungry host of parasites" (*Soft*, 130). As Hassan explains, "Burroughs seems determined to alter the human condition" (1993: 15). For this purpose, he also introduces an element able to destroy a fixed and manipulated scheme of reality: in the three volumes of the trilogy, the use of apomorphine becomes essential when trying to break the constraints of an assumed reality. Inspector Lee explains that this substance is the key for those who want to destroy their bonds with a made-up reality and fixed identities. As Land recounts, "apomorphine has been called into Earth by Burroughs to prevent 'My': the complete annihilation of a clear, queer identity of dependency, addiction and mind-control" (2005: 465). As Inspector Lee explains in *Nova Express*: "You can cut the enemy off your line by the judicious use of apomorphine and silence" (*Nova*, 7).

The redefinition of the “Nova reality” throughout the use of apomorphine and the fragmentation in the characters’ descriptions point directly to the reader’s new literary role. Burroughs invites the reader to escape imposed interpretations and to liberate itself from the constraints of a classical authorial voice that gives closed plots, characters and meanings. The metaliterary factor is also important as long as it reinforces the purpose of the *cut-up* method. Thus, the concepts of “identity”, “subjectivity”, “bodies” and “reality” contribute to create a construct of paths that aim to destroy the reader’s previous ideas about what surrounds him/her. “Burroughs”, says Tietchen, “encourages his reader to recognize that his or her subjectivity has been constructed via these consumed ideologies” (2001: 110).

In conclusion, the dismemberment of the reader’s reality contributes to the creation of a new world where boundaries are nonexistent because all beings and situations are possible. Thus, in the *Nova Trilogy*, both content and form point out to the reconstruction of the reader’s subjectivity, the one that has to be built up out of the machinery of control and its social and moral codes. In this compound of allegories, Burroughs tries to show that the reader must revolt against imposed subjectivities, to develop their own criticism. “Burroughs”, says Baldwin, “[protests] against society’s controlling definitions of sexuality, narrative, and visual perception” (2000: 67), with the purpose of “[suggesting] not so much alternative narratives as anti-narratives free from the constrictions of socially constructed language and image” (2000: 71).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated how the question of subjectivity marked the modernist and postmodernist periods. Although there exist differences between both movements, they aimed to end with the traditional concepts of “author” and “reader”. This last was considered a passive agent that had to gain a new active role, which comes parallel to the vanishing of authorial impositions. In order to achieve this, authors developed a series of literary strategies such as collage, intertextuality or linguistic renovation. Their purpose was to disrupt the reader’s expectations about linearity and every kind of conventionalism. In this paper, the explanation of these modernist and postmodernist concerns have been given with examples from the works of authors like Gertrude Stein, Thomas S. Eliot, Paul Auster, Robert Coover or Thomas Pynchon.

During the eighties, the new electronic literature also tackled the question of subjectivity, due to the fact that its format (software) needed an “active” agent/reader in order to create stories. In this paper, it has been given a succinct explanation on electronic literatures, its typology, its material aspects and the points that relate this literature with the postmodernist concerns with subjectivity.

Moreover, the analysis on William Burroughs’s *Nova Trilogy* has made possible to illustrate his principal linguistic theories and literary techniques. His ideas about the language as a virus (“word-virus”) made him develop the *cut-up* method, a technique that consisted on the deconstruction of different texts, and their subsequent reconstruction by merging them together. This method also comprehended audio and video manipulations; it is a multimedia technique that characterized Burroughs’s multimedia aesthetic. His eclecticism contributed to strengthen the empowerment of the reader, which he wanted to liberate from the bonds of authorial control: he expected it to freely reconstruct the texts in order to achieve a personal interpretation of the literary work. Thus, it is interesting to observe how the *Nova Trilogy* represents the postmodern concerns on subjectivity and foreshadows a new era of digital literary creation.

5. Future research lines

It would also be interesting to extend the study of subjectivity to previous literary movements, in order to draw a wider panorama on the topic. This could help to describe the evolution of this issue through time. Moreover, an intercultural study could be tackled in order to compare English literature with those from other countries, which could show possible connections and influences between them. The aforementioned researches could be complemented with a brief review on the main philosophical ideas, since there seems to exist strong bonds between both disciplines. Finally, it would also be enriching to delve into the question of subjectivity in 21th century print literature, as well as continue its impact and development on new digital narratologies (such as the emergent videogames or the literary blogs).

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