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## Cutting edge

Two major Beat figures: Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs

By **Jules Smith**



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Brion Gysin and William Burroughs with "The Dream Machine" | © Harold Chapman/TopFoto

### IN THIS REVIEW

#### BLADE RUNNER: A MOVIE

88pp. Tangerine Press. Paperback, £9.

William S. Burroughs

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#### LET THE MICE IN

Edited by Jan Herman 80pp. Moloko Print. €20.

Brion Gysin

uring an interview with Kathy Acker at the October Gallery in London in 1988, William Burroughs remarked, "I'm seeing a film when I write". His prose is indeed cinematic, with perverse echoes of Hollywood product:

**D** mordant voiceovers, hard-boiled dialogue, slapstick comedy scenes, nightmarish dream sequences, montages, jump cuts, cross-cutting and any number of enigmatic fadeouts. These are most sensationally deployed in *Naked Lunch* (1959), but turn up in many of Burroughs's other fictions. Art techniques also fed his word hoard, notably by way of the cut-up technique which he and the experimental artist Brion Gysin pioneered sixty years ago. Burroughs's filmic aspirations were various. He wrote the script for - and appeared, alongside Gysin and their acolyte Ian Sommerville - in Anthony Balch's short films *Towers Open Fire* (1963) and *The Cut-Ups* (1966). Their entertaining oddities may be viewed on YouTube. Moving back to New York in 1974, he taught a course in screenwriting, and wrote two fictions approximating to film scripts: *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz* (1970, revised 1975) and *Blade Runner: A Movie* (1979).

It was the first two words only of the latter that resulted in Burroughs's most significant impact on mainstream Hollywood, being seized on by the director Ridley Scott for his otherwise unrelated 1982 sci-fi film of that title. In a lengthy introduction to this handsomely produced fortieth anniversary edition, Oliver Harris explains how it happened. Burroughs's source was *The Bladerunner*, a 1974 dystopian pulp novel by Alan E. Nourse set in a near-future ravaged New York, about a medical apocalypse averted by teenage boys running supplies to underground medics. Harris scrupulously outlines the "world of difference" between the two titles, describing Burroughs's lurid storyline - in which, after riots at hospitals, a virus vaccine is spread to counter an epidemic of "accelerated cancer" - as "a mutation" of Nourse's. He points out several overt recyclings from *Naked Lunch* (such as the drunken anaesthetist and mouthwash gags), as well as sexualized boy gangs from *The Wild Boys* (1971). Virus B-23, with its accompanying uncontrollable sexual frenzy, which has its origins in *Blade Runner*, was soon to feature in the novel *Cities of the Red Night* (1981). Harris's enthusiasm is infectious, but he admits that *Blade Runner* is difficult to visualize as a film. It is riddled with repetitions, narrative discontinuities and time shifts - the very features that, for Harris, make it "exemplary".

Burroughs was fond of quoting Gysin's declaration that "writing is fifty years behind painting", from Gysin's essay "Cut-Ups Self-Explained". This appears in Brion Gysin's *Let the Mice In*, originally published in 1973 by the Something Else Press in San Francisco. This new edition of an influential work, both instruction manual and manifesto, is extended by the use of photographs of a smartly dressed Burroughs, Gysin, Sommerville and others, in Tangier and at the Beat Hotel in Paris. Gysin sets out the how and why of the cut-up method. Yet, he writes: "Anything I may say about Cut-Ups must sound like special pleading unless you try it for yourself". The purpose was to "cut through the word lines to hear a new voice off the page", a concept that Burroughs later extended to tape recordings.

A section of Gysin's "Permutated Poems" (the permutations carried out by Sommerville's computer and arranged in columns over several pages) shows them to be sound poetry reminiscent of the work of Kurt Schwitters, word patterns giving "an expanding ripple of meanings". Of "I Am That I Am", Gysin states that he heard "the divine Tautology" as "a sort of wild pealing inside my head, like an ether experience. Other works indicate the drug habits that Burroughs and Gysin lived with and among: "KICK THAT HABIT MAN / THAT HABIT KICK MAN / MAN KICK THAT HABIT / KICK THAT MAN HABIT".

Of particularly eccentric interest is the essay by Ian Sommerville about the “Flicker”, patented in 1961 as “The Dream Machine” by Gysin, designed “to stimulate our faculty of image-making” and ecstatic visions through endless visual repetitions. Consisting of a cardboard cylinder with a lightbulb on a gramophone at 78 rpm, the Dream Machine was augmented by Gysin with an interior cylinder covered with his own paintings. The whirling shimmering device can be seen and heard in action during Balch’s film *Towers Open Fire*. Burroughs contributes two essays to *Let the Mice In*: “The Invisible Generation” about the potential effect of tape recordings containing “waking suggestions”, and “Word Authority More Habit Forming Than Heroin”, itself a bravura example of the cut-up method, shuffling language into abstract patterns.

Gysin is a lucid and witty writer. He gives vivid glimpses of Burroughs at the moment when *Naked Lunch* was being edited for Olympia Press - as he “ranted through the gargantuan roles of Doc Benway, A.J., Clem & Jody”, or, as a drug addict, “through the shadows from one pharmacia to another, hugging a bottle of paregoric ... his raincoat glinting like the underbelly of a shark”. Brion Gysin’s *Let the Mice In* is a key collaborative work. It represents those late 1950s to early 1960s years when Beat writing met European experimentalism. The most sophisticated intelligence of the Beat Generation was permanently affected.

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