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Response #4

Space Mythology, Now Time and Space Mythology

The space mythology established in William Burroughs' late works, namely the *Cities of the Red Night* trilogy, shifts away from the mythology of his cut-up projects towards a more comprehensible and accessible narrative that *creates* time travel, rather than only simulating the experience. While the cut ups employed a method to transport the reader through time with the act of reading them, *Cities of the Red Night* expands on the use of organizing text to simulate time travel, but also constructs an elaborate "myth-narrative" of time travel that effectively collapses spatial and temporal locations into one. The collapse of space and time allows Burroughs to escape the confines of two respective "modern" myths: a discretionary model of space, and a linear model of history. His project, described by Timothy Murphy as "revolutionary" and "amodern", comes to its full realization in the *Cities of the Red Night* trilogy, creating a myth-narrative which threads together the fragmentation in the fantasy world he has constructed by dictating the "rules" and explanations necessary for an effective and thorough mythology.

Three distinct narratives are constructed in the trilogy, at first appearing disjunctive and fragmented. Characters of vastly different spatial and temporal locations are introduced during the first few routines, leaving the reader scrambling to identify the connection between the fantasy world's three separate strands of narrative. Despite the more distinguishable narrative of each individual chapter, the organization at first appears similar to the cut-ups of the *Nova Trilogy*, which construct a conflict between the invading Venusian "Nova Mob" on earth, and the efforts to deal with the invasion, and all the while Burroughs employing the cut-up technique that

he and Brion Gysin both claim to simulate the experience of time travel. Alex Houen's *William S. Burroughs's Cities of the Red Night Trilogy-Writing Outer Space* argues that the cut up method simulates an experience of alternative spatial existence, "...what is important to note is that the techniques (cut-ups and fold-ins) are instrumental in facilitating a form of space-time travel whereby the reader experiences an extratemporal simultaneity in the text that escapes the confines of linear time". "Extratemporal simultaneity" refers to the ability of the reader to exist in linear time, by reading a discernable narrative created by the cut-up, and outside of linear time by experiencing past and future texts folded into the same narrative. Houen ultimately says of the trilogy's project: "We could say, then, that in the Nova trilogy Burroughs founds a literary Big Bang out of his anti-narrative techniques, and it is with the *Cities of the Red Night* trilogy that distinct worlds begin to form". Although the cut-up techniques allow the reader to escape the "confines of linear time", *Cities of the Red Night* moves away from the technique to further establish a fantastic mythology, rather than writing method, that will allow for such freedom.

The trilogy continues to switch between narratives after the introductory chapters, and as the novel progresses the characters and action merge into a discernable singular plot. Murphy claims about the trilogy's project with regard to escape Western time/history, "...we could say that in this trilogy, Burroughs recognizes, for the first time, the real indeterminism or contingency of Western history, and begins to hatch a plot that will interfere with its linear development"(180). This explicit plan is laid out in the explanation of the cities of the red night, and the means by which they must be explored, at the beginning of Book 2. The routine, "Cities of the Red Night" details the linear history of the cities, the social hierarchy of the "Transmigrants" and the "Receptacles", and a description of the cultural/financial dynamics of each of the cities. The legend creates an image of an idealistic time in which, "Food was plentiful

and for the time the population was completely stable: no one was born unless someone died”(153), but tells how the balance falls into instability and is taken over by a virus caused potentially by a meteor or black hole that somehow caused the B-23 virus.

These scripts are to be rewritten by Clem Snide after demands from the Iguana twins; so the writer can literally overcome linear history by rewriting the past. Part of the myth included in the *Cities of the Red Night* script is the rule by which the cities must be traveled: “The traveler must start in Tamaghis and make his way through the other cities in the order named. This pilgrimage may take many lifetimes”(159). This sentence at first seems to establish a rule by which six discrete spaces must be traveled by a distinct individual, and the phrase “may take many lifetimes” may be thought to be a hyperbole, or dramatic expression of how much space is to be covered. But the means by which the characters do travel to each different city is by a time machine, often at the same time traveling to different times as they make their way through the cities. At the end of routine taking place in 1860 location that would “now” be lower Manhattan, the crew assembles and Krup makes the command, ““All leaves cancelled. Report back to ship immediately.; Next stop: the future.” The ship navigates through discrete spaces and times, and the language of the book speaks about the future *as if* it were such a discrete space too.

Ultimately, the scripts of “Cities of the Red Night” seem to function in the same way as Burroughs’s trilogy, *Cities of the Red Night* with both Clem Snide and Burroughs using writing as a means to escape the confines of linear history by creating new mythologies that Murphy would regard as both “amodern” and “revolutionary”. Both are “amodern” in the sense that they simultaneously escape the confines of modern myth, and create alternative myth-narratives to explain fragmentation. The language and actions of the characters collapse time and space, regarding past and future historical moments as discrete spatial locations that can be travelled to

using Krup's ship. This method appears to be fine tuned in Burroughs' late work, and can be recognized as diverging from the simulation methods for time travel used in the cut-up projects.