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Falling into place

Wayfinding with Malcolm Mc Neill and William S. Burroughs

by Adrian Hill

Part 1

Ah Pook is still here

One year ago, I wrote an online comment on *The Comics Journal* website. It was underneath [Rudy Rucker's review](#) of Malcolm Mc Neill's [The Lost Art of Ah Pook](#) and [Observed While Falling: Bill Burroughs, Ah Pook, and Me](#). The books detail the never completed artist-writer collaboration between Mc Neill, a painter and illustrator, and writer William S. Burroughs. *Observed While Falling* is a memoir of Mc Neill's time working with Burroughs, as well as the unusual legacy of the project in the artist's later life. *The Lost Art of Ah Pook* is a visual record of the project's progression, and an archive of additional published artwork by Mc Neill that accompanied other writings composed by Burroughs.

This was my comment:

I just finished reading "Observed While Falling", and am happy to report that I can't remember the last time a book fucked me up so much—in the best sense of the expression. I bought a copy after reading this review. Without knowing any more about it, I ended up reading the bulk of the book on Dec. 21...read it and you'll understand.

I'm imagining someone out there scanning the complete text of *Ah Pook is Here and Other Texts* as I write this post, in the interests of disseminating a copy freely and widely. Copyright and the Burroughs Estate be damned.

I think Bill would approve.

I never found that free copy of the text, but I did cave and buy a copy for \$50 online. The last time I looked online, there were two copies on sale through Amazon for \$12,974.98—but it's *possible* that the value of the book has been slightly inflated by the vendor. Though reading *Ah Pook is Here and Other Texts* has brought a modicum of clarity to *Observed While Falling* (OWF) and *The Lost Art of Ah Pook* (LAAP), the latter works stand on their own as artefacts of great interest and inquiry into the nature of reality itself.

As soon as I finished reading *Observed While Falling* for the first time, I started reading it again. I took notes, transcribing whole passages from the book in an attempt to unearth some deeper understanding of Burroughs' cosmology, and why Mc Neill's books resonated so strongly with me. Burroughs' writing is at times almost

impossible to comprehend without a guide. By contrast, Mc Neill's account of his time with Burroughs and beyond is challenging, yet succinct and digestible—with unflinchingly honest observations thrown into the mix.

As my wife and kids are wont to do when I am compiling notes, they openly criticized the compulsiveness with which I was typing out the passages from *Observed While Falling*. I couldn't explain the obsession...then one day, I came home from work and a letter had arrived...from Malcolm Mc Neill.

"What the..." I couldn't believe it. A letter, no less! On the basis of my comment on the *Comics Journal* website, Mc Neill had tracked down my address and sent me a letter, since I had neglected to include a contact email address on [my blog](#). The letter was supportive: "A book that fucks someone up in the best way is truly an encouragement." Mc Neill mentioned that when he was growing up, he used to watch a how-to-draw television program by the artist Adrian Hill, which is what led him to noticing and reading my comment. *Quelle coincidence!* I was drawn in: Mc Neill inspired me to continue reading and writing. This is the culmination of that work.

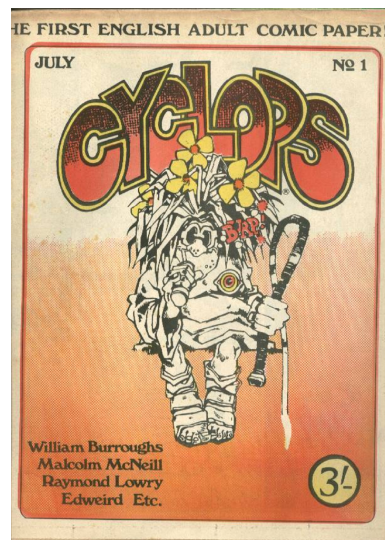
Burroughs' aesthetic "philosophy" extends beyond comics, to the relationship between words and pictures in general—their contribution to how we perceive the world, and how equally we are limited by those perceptions. What is most remarkable about Burroughs' insights, and Mc Neill's ability to describe and render them explicit through his art, is that these explorations were conducted over thirty years ago. *Ah Pook is Here*—as it was originally conceived—constitutes an early predecessor of the "graphic novel" format, and is only now being fully brought to light. Even by today's standards, Malcolm Mc Neill's half of the Ah Pook equation constitutes a boundary-blurring experiment in extended graphic narrative.

The Unspeakable Mr. Hart

Mc Neill graduated from the Graphics program at Hornsey College of Art in 1970. He wanted to study in the Fine Arts program but was encouraged to pursue illustration instead. The two final papers he wrote for the program were on Egon Schiele and "Visual Narrative," a history of the process of using images to tell story; from the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and Maya up to the present day Sunday Funnies" (OWF, 14). Consider that Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) only recently introduced these ideas to the popular imagination, and you get an idea of how progressive Mc Neill's thinking was even as a young artist.

Back then, Mc Neill was working on personal projects that he describes as "self-contained narrative episodes in the form of freestanding paintings" (OWF, 15). He came up with the idea of publishing a British anthologized comics magazine called *Cyclops* in the same spirit as American underground comix. Mc Neill eventually worked on the project with Graham Keen—the graphics editor for London's *International Times*—who assumed a coordination role, and suggested that Mc Neill provide a visual interpretation of a text being supplied by Burroughs on a monthly basis, called "The Unspeakable Mr. Hart."

Mc Neill had never met Burroughs and knew little about him.



Cyclops #1
Cover by Malcolm Mc Neill

“The Unspeakable Mr. Hart” was discontinued after four instalments. Due to copyright restrictions, neither the text originally designed to accompany the art for “The Unspeakable Mr. Hart”, nor the text for *Ah Pook is Here* is included in *The Lost Art of Ah Pook*—though some low-res samplings of “The Unspeakable Mr. Hart” populated with text can be found online.



The Word/Image Track

Mc Neill's work on "The Unspeakable Mr. Hart" led to Burroughs insisting that he meet the artist, based on an uncanny resemblance between Mc Neill's drawings of Mr. Hart and Burroughs' own physical characteristics. For Burroughs, it was clearly a sign. By the end of their first meeting, Burroughs and Mc Neill were discussing working with one another on a new creation, potentially on a much grander scale both physically and artistically: it was the birth of *Ah Pook is Here*.

Mc Neill's stylistic choices for *Ah Pook* drew from two parallel inspirations: the visual imagery of "The Garden of Earthly Delights" by Hieronymus Bosch, and images from the Dresden Codex, housed within the British Museum. Mc Neill and Burroughs visited the museum and studied the Codex thoroughly together, even requesting a photocopy of it—which in those days was a prohibitive request.



"The Garden of Earthly Delights" by Hieronymus Bosch
[Image in the public domain, Wikimedia Commons]

Burroughs was still writing while Mc Neill generated his artwork. The disparate concepts explored in *Ah Pook*—and the fact that it remained a dynamic text during Mc Neill's art production—led to the development of a unique methodology and presentation format:

The style of the artwork made it difficult to alter and since the text was continually subject to change, I was reluctant to commit to finished pages. I began to create frames individually with the intention of assembling them once everything was complete. This led to the idea of the book as a single image: a continuous *panorama*, something completely in keeping with the Mayan Codices (OWF, 41).



[Salomon Arts Gallery, New York City]
<http://www.lostartofahpook.com/shows.html>



The Dresden Codex, pages 6-8

[Image in the public domain, Wikimedia Commons.

A high-res version of the complete Dresden Codex in correct reading sequence is available on the Commons]

The collaboration between Burroughs and Mc Neill was an attempt to literally and figuratively “cut the word lines” of what Burroughs described as the word/image track. It was a summoning of *Ah Pook*, the Mayan god of death and destruction, into the modern world. Burroughs and Mc Neill jointly challenged the limits of the form(s) within which they were operating:

Apart from the instant dismissal the word “comic” tended to evoke from publishers, *lines* around things restricted the kind of images I was able to produce—particularly with regards [to] depth and light. They were also contrary to the very *idea* of *Ah Pook* (39).

Breaking down the traditional frame-by-frame visual narrative into a representation with permeable borders allowed Mc Neill to work on pages in any order he chose. To quote at length:

Thinking of *Ah Pook* in this way opened up a new way of perceiving a book, and reduced the difficulties inherent in an evolving script. Most significantly, it meant I was no longer confined to a particular order when producing the images.

A true panorama is an image extended horizontally in order to achieve a complete 360-degree point of view. An image that, in effect, has no beginning or end. It was a design concept that corresponded perfectly with the ongoing, reciprocal nature of *Ah Pook*. By creating frames from whichever part of the book I felt like, I was also in sync with the concept of the book: breaking down the word/image track and traveling back and forth in time.

The book was designed to reflect the structure of a Codex with the image narrative taking place within conventional frames. When there was conflict in the story, however, this ordered structure also broke down, allowing for a free-form kind of imagery unrestrained by either frames or the edges of pages. To suggest that such chaos was always imminent, 'time holes'—irregularly shaped sections of images from elsewhere in the book—floated randomly throughout. Mayan gods who'd escaped from Hart's books also wandered through the images both inside and outside of the frames: sometimes participating in the story, sometimes not. Mayan glyphs accompanied them, evoking Bill's notion of word as virus.

Finally, as an indication of the contrast between Hart's either/or, Judeo/Christian worldview and that of the spectral, cyclical view of the Maya, the entire book alternated between black-and-white and full color (OWF, 40).

Mc Neill did not depend entirely on Burroughs' text as the driver for his artwork. He propelled the storyline by creating an allegorical framework of his own—for example, within which bats morphed into butterflies as a vehicle for the passage of time. Mc Neill explains in [an interview](#) from *The White Review*:

The images would not be constrained by the edges of the pages either. At the end it amounted to scenes flowing from one time zone to another. I needed a device to get from Armageddon to the first evolutionary change and came up with 'bats out of hell'. I filled the bat shapes with the incoming scene, which in turn used birds to get to the next. The last was to be the release of the butterflies of fear, which would lead into the Garden of Delights. These weren't in the script obviously, but Bill was more than happy with the results. The random juxtaposition of incoming and outgoing images in effect corresponded to his Cutup methodology.

Control

Ah Pook is Here was originally conceived as a graphic narrative, but Mc Neill's illustrations were never published simultaneously with the text—with the exception of a twelve page excerpt published in *Rush* magazine in December 1976 (LAAP, 152). *Rush* was a "marijuana advocacy" magazine published by the Swank Magazine Corporation, publishers of the porn magazine *Swank*.

The text of *Ah Pook is Here* is actually among Burroughs' more linear works of fictional prose, with Mc Neill's artwork comprising the "image" half of the word/image track. The reasons for the Burroughs estate refusing to include the text remain largely unclear, but evidently involve great control exercised by James Grauerholz, the executor of Burroughs' estate.

When Burroughs moved out of his Franklin Street loft in New York in 1975, he agreed to pass the loft on to Mc Neill, as well as agreeing to absorb the cost of \$7000 worth of improvements that had been made in the loft during the time that Burroughs stayed there. Ordinarily, incoming tenants would have reimbursed outgoing tenants for those changes. This gracious act was an expression of Burroughs' affection for Mc Neill.

James Grauerholz was about the same age as Mc Neill, and by this time was solidly established as Burroughs' personal secretary. Grauerholz insisted to Mc Neill that Burroughs had not been in his right mind when he made the offer of the loft. When Mc Neill asked Burroughs about the exchange, Burroughs flatly denied Grauerholz's suggestion that Burroughs had been "tripping." When Mc Neill later confronted Grauerholz about the discrepancy between the two accounts, Mc Neill reports, "...his response was remarkably candid:

'I admit I've gone out of my way to obstruct you on occasions,' he said. *"I put it down to sibling rivalry'* (OWF, 75).

Burroughs assumed a paternal role for Grauerholz, evidenced by the fact that Burroughs later legally adopted him as his son.

Without the publication of Mc Neill's illustrations along with the *Ah Pook is Here* manuscript, his contribution to the Burroughs legacy has remained largely undocumented, up until the Fantagraphics release of Mc Neill's works. With the publication of *Ah Pook is Here and Other Texts* by John Calder in 1979, the word lines were literally cut entirely out of the picture. This included Mc Neill's original cover image for *Ah Pook is Here*, which Grauerholz replaced without Mc Neill's knowing that it was Grauerholz who was uniquely responsible for making the change. Grauerholz also (and inexplicably) removed those passages from the text of *Ah Pook is Here* associated with the original cover (LAAP, 32, 47, 98).

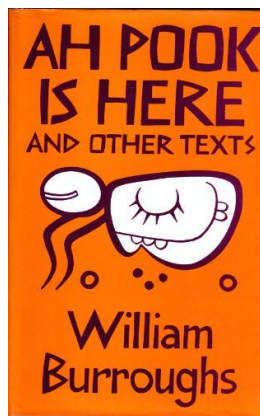
Burroughs, however, did provide an acknowledgment of Mc Neill's contribution in the Preface:

Ah Pook is Here was originally planned as a picture book modelled on the surviving Mayan codices. Malcolm McNeill [*sic*] was to do the illustration, and I was to provide the text. Over the years of our collaboration there were a number of changes in the text, and Malcolm McNeill produced more than a hundred pages of artwork. However, owing partly to the expense of full-color reproduction, and because the books [*sic*] falls into neither the category of the conventional illustrated book nor that of a comix publication, there have been difficulties with the arrangements for the complete work – which calls for about a hundred pages of artwork with text (thirty in full-color) and about fifty pages of text alone.

The book is in fact unique. Some pages are entirely text, some entirely pictorial, and some mixed. Finally Malcolm McNeill and I have decided to publish the text without the artwork, still in hopes of seeing the eventual publication of this work that has been eight years in preparation (APIHOT, 11).

William S. Burroughs

27 April 1978



1979 Calder edition of *Ah Pook is Here and Other Texts*
Cover design by Brian Paine (glyph of Ah Puch from the Dresden Codex)

[Reality Studio: A William S. Burroughs Community](#) includes passages from a 1972 *Rolling Stone* interview, a 1973 BBC interview, and Burroughs' essay, "Les Voleurs" (from *The Adding Machine: Collected Essays*, John Calder, 1985) in which Burroughs mentions working with Mc Neill on an important new project.

In the essay, "Ah Pook is Where?" by Sara Van Ness—an insightful critical addition to *The Lost Art of Ah Pook is Here*—Van Ness suggests that one of the reasons publishers shied away from printing Mc Neill's artwork was not just due to its pornographic imagery, but also because the work fit neither within the genres of straight pornography, nor the comic book.

Even though publishers would not print the book in its originally conceived form, why is there virtually no mention of Mc Neill as a key player in Burroughs' life and artistic development in *Literary Outlaw*, Ted Morgan's biography of William S. Burroughs? I posed the question to Mc Neill, whose response, in a nutshell, boiled down to this one sentence: "It was always a mystery." Mc Neill had spent time on multiple occasions with Burroughs, Ted Morgan and Morgan's wife Nancy while Morgan was working on the biography. But for whatever reasons, there is only one sparse reference to the Burroughs-Mc Neill collaboration in *Literary Outlaw*. When the biography was republished in 2012, even with Morgan's awareness that *Observed While Falling* and *The Lost Art of Ah Pook* were being published in short order, no additions or amendments had been made to Burroughs' biography. The publisher requested that no changes be made to the body text of the biography in the new edition, but asked that Morgan write a new introduction and final chapter to the volume. Including mention of *Ah Pook is Here* in either of those sections of the new version did not make contextual sense.¹

¹ Personal email correspondence with Malcolm Mc Neill.

At the time when Mc Neill approached James Grauerholz about publishing *Observed While Falling*, “James was now lecturing in American Studies at the University of Kansas. He’d finally put to rest any idea of sibling rivalry by becoming Bill’s legally adopted son and was sole heir to Bill’s entire creative legacy” (OWF, 142).

In spite of this claim, when Grauerholz read through an early draft of *Observed While Falling*, Mc Neill was asked to “revisit” his memory and rewrite elements of his memoir to portray Grauerholz in a more positive light. Mc Neill conceded. Why then, were negotiations stalled indefinitely when Mc Neill requested to reproduce excerpts of the text of *Ah Pook is Here*? No explanation was offered by either Grauerholz or Jeffrey Posternak of the Wylie Agency, Burroughs’ publishing agent.

Gary Groth and Mc Neill had initially suggested re-publishing the Calder edition of *Ah Pook is Here* as a standalone text, but this suggestion was refused. Grauerholz asked for *Observed While Falling* to not be published at all. In addition, he suggested that he could edit the originally approved Calder version of *Ah Pook is Here* if a new version were to be released—both requests that Mc Neill flatly turned down. At this point, Grauerholz broke off all communications with Mc Neill and Groth. With negotiations at a standstill, Mc Neill chose to revert to his original version of *Observed While Falling*.

“Cut the word lines and the future leaks out”

Burroughs was convinced that a record of past, present and future reality exists as a kind of script acted out through time and space. By perforating the “word/image track,” holes in that continuum allow us to glean insights into events from other time periods, a form of prescience or retrocognition. The nature of coincidence constitutes an alignment between these events and our own situatedness in relation to them.

According to Burroughs, one way of encouraging these association lines to reveal themselves is through the seemingly random manipulation of text to make new meanings. The painter Brion Gryson is attributed with having first discovered the “cut-up” technique through which these meanings become apparent, though Burroughs quickly adopted it as a primary method for composing his works. The cut-up approach was inspired in part by the “cadavre exquis” ([exquisite corpse](#)) exercise first realized by the surrealists, with whom Gryson was at one point affiliated in his early adulthood.

The Third Mind by Burroughs and Brion Gryson suggests that cut-ups are a gateway to understanding reality through action. The cut-up is something anyone can *do*, not just talk about doing. Cut-ups are experiential in nature, and since anyone can do cut ups, they level the playing field: they offer anyone access to a revelatory psychic space.

Cut-ups are something we all do with words anyway, even though we don’t realize it. Burroughs suggests that all too often we are neither conscious of how we use words, nor of their effects on our surroundings. Cut-ups allow us to realize that the universe is infused with meaning; all we need to do is look for the signs. Those signs can only be realized within the space-time continuum.

In *The Third Mind*, Burroughs explains that his point of entry into fiction is the dream: “Precisely what is a dream? A certain juxtaposition of word and image.” Burroughs’ preoccupation with words led him to questioning their very role in human experience. As Mc Neill explains,

“*Nobody seems to ask the question what words actually are...*” [Burroughs] once remarked. “*...and what exactly their relationship is to the human nervous system.*”

[Burroughs] viewed them as energy—organic, even—and subjected them to laboratory-like scrutiny, relentlessly prodding at them and dissecting them to try and elicit a response—to try and determine patterns of behaviour. His m.o. [*modus operandi*—“method”] as a writer might be described as the process of using words to see what words can *do* (OWF, 44).

Further to this notion, Burroughs suggested, “The purpose of writing is to make it happen” (OWF, 44). The analogy between words and organic life led to Burroughs’ contention that language is a virus, its only end being to reproduce itself—though Burroughs had other reasons to “write his way out.”



LAAP, 106-108

“Nothing is true, everything is permitted”

Burroughs’ writing in *Ah Pook is Here* was partially informed by an avid interest in the Mayan codices. Joan Vollmer (Burroughs’ wife) initially turned him onto the Mayans. (It is worth noting that prior to and even during his marriage, Burroughs also had multiple gay lovers, and would swear off women completely following Vollmer’s death). Vollmer believed that Mayan priests had the ability to practice telepathy.

Burroughs is probably almost as well known for his writing as for the fact that he killed Vollmer by firing a gun into her temple, ostensibly aiming for a shot glass that she had placed on her head in a spontaneous re-enactment of the “William Tell routine.” The exact details of the events surrounding Vollmer’s death are uncertain, and have been documented in [“The Death of Joan Vollmer Burroughs: What Really Happened?”](#) by James Grauerholz.

In a famous passage quoted in *Literary Outlaw*, Burroughs explains the impact of Joan Vollmer’s death at his hands in terms of his writing:

I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan’s death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing. I live with the constant threat of possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out (LO, 199).

Burroughs’ interest in systems of control is said to have originated with Brion Gysin’s fascination with [Hassan I Sabbah](#). Ted Morgan suggests that Hassan I Sabbah “...devised the maxim ‘Nothing is true, everything is permitted,’ and lived up to it, recruiting political assassins who were fed hashish for motivation” (LO, 305). Morgan’s attribution of the quote to Hassan I Sabbah has since been challenged, as has Burroughs’ description of Sabbah as “the Old Man of the Mountain” (OWF, 180). Be that as it may, Burroughs was especially taken with the Persian leader’s supposed dictum, as well as the element of control inherent in Hassan I Sabbah’s purported ability to rule over a group of ruthless killers through regularly administering them mind-altering drugs.

Burroughs’ *Cities of the Red Night* begins with an “Invocation” that dedicates the book to Hassan I Sabbah and Ah Pook among others. As Mc Neill describes in *Observed While Falling*, *Cities of the Red Night* also notably includes a passage that describes a collaborative process strikingly resembling the one utilized by Mc Neill in the creation of images designed to accompany the text of *Ah Pook is Here*. And the book includes a character assuming the role of Ah Pook, fucking a young Corn God, spreading death and decay amongst the passengers on a Spanish galleon when they come—standard Burroughs fare, and a nod to ideas originally conceived in *Ah Pook is Here*.

Before and after

A year passes, and world still remains intact.

In the Classic period of Mayan civilization, dates were tracked according to what is described as the Long Count. In the traditional Mayan calendar, there are 18 20-day months in a year.

Each of these months is a *katun*.

One year is calculated as 360 days, or one *tun*.

A period of twenty *tuns* is called a *baktun*: 400 years.

In addition to this straightforward counting method, Mayan timekeepers also used an almanac on a cycle of 260 days, the *tzolkin* ("count of days") to inform horoscopes and crop predictions, as well as recording astronomical patterns with an accurate solar calendar.

One *katun* cycle is 20 *tuns*, or 7200 days. The *katun* cycle is significant in that mathematically, it is also the point of convergence with the *tzolkin* cycle of 260 days, in that both are divisible by twenty, and there are 20 days in a *katun*: 13 *katuns* equals one *tzolkin*.

In the *tzolkin*, the beginning of the most recent *baktun* is dated at 1618, and its end is calculated as December 21, 2012. The date's significance as the end of the world is a fabrication of western New Age spiritualists, for in the Mayan worldview, the Long Count has no beginning and no end.

In the same way that the English names of the days of the week originate with the names of the Norse gods (with the exception of Saturday), "every unit of time was a numinous being, influenced by many divinities, and a divinity in itself."² The quality of any given day (in spiritual terms) is determined by the interaction of the various divinities at play, among other factors:

For the Maya nothing happens purely by chance. There are influences at work in everything: the weight of the number; the character of the day; the character of the year in which the day falls. Added to these are the positions of the planets, the phase of the moon, the earthly seasons of rain and heat (TAM, 247).

In all of the Maya languages, the word for "sun" also means "day" and "time." Wright, quoting Mexican scholar León-Portilla explains:

"The Maya conceived of time in close association with the solar deity, something divine in itself, limitless and ubiquitous." Time animates, and is indivisible from, space: "All the deities present and acting in space are the changing countenances of time. Isolated from time, space becomes inconceivable. In the absence of time-cycles, there is no life, nothing happens, not even death" (TAM, 249).

Following the Classic period of the Mayans, the recording of the 400-year *baktuns* was abandoned, with the 20-year *katuns* repeating themselves indefinitely, though they were still attached to the 260-day *tzolkin* cycle. This new timekeeping method is known as the Short Count. Ronald Wright explains the relationship between the Long Count and the Short Count as follows:

Because the *tzolkin*, like the Old World zodiac, influenced destiny, the Maya thought that *katuns* bearing the same sequence—were fated to hold similar events. Past and future became structured in a symmetrical relationship; history became prophecy; and prophecies became self-fulfilling because actions were apparently undertaken to coincide with the appropriate date. Having lost the statelier rhythms of the Long Count, the Maya were trapped in whirlpools of calendric destiny. For them, as for T.S. Eliot³,

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past (TAM, 75-76).

² Wright, Ronald. *Time Among the Maya* (TAM). New York: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1989, pp. 34-35.
Mayan calendar watermark, image in the Public Domain

³ T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton." First poem of *The Four Quartets*.

Exploring inner space

William S. Burroughs reached similar conclusions to the Mayans concerning the nature of time in his travels as “a *mapmaker, charting unexplored areas of the psyche*” (OWF, 134)—in particular with the consumption of the hallucinogenic brew called *yagé* (also known as *ayahuasca*) by *brujos*, or medicine men. *Yagé* is concocted predominantly by the indigenous peoples of Peru. Burroughs spent time in the region with the explicit purpose in mind of seeking out the drug. In a letter to Allen Ginsberg (July 10, 1953), Burroughs wrote, “*Yagé* is space time travel. The room seems to shake and vibrate with motion.”⁴ He further explained,

The Indians call *yagé* a Soul Vine and it is used by medicine men to potentate their psychic powers. After taking *yagé* they allegedly can locate lost or stolen objects, read the thoughts of others, diagnose disease, foresee the future, and obtain knowledge of distant objects and events (YLR, 90).

Ethnobotanical researcher Steve Beyer [has quoted Burroughs](#) in a letter to Allen Ginsberg explaining in 1955, “The meaning of Interzone, its space time location is at a point where three-dimensional fact merges into dream, and dreams erupt into the real world.”

Beyer describes this zone as “the world of the shaman—the vision, the apparition, the lucid dream, seeing through the ordinary to the miraculous luminescence of the spirits, perceiving the omnipresent pure sound of the singing plants.”

Mc Neill has similarly described the Mayan preoccupation with time as one example in “...a long record of shamans, mystics, seers, prophets, psychics, and clairvoyants [which] reveals a propensity that has conceivably existed since humans became conscious of time” (OWF, 114).

Burroughs and Mc Neill may be perceived as descendants situated from within this lineage, though both would most likely classify themselves as spiritual “independents.” Mc Neill’s studies in the practice of *attention* suggest that by asking the right questions in any given situation, an increased awareness of the information at one’s disposal can be cultivated. By extension, with the increase in access to information worldwide through digital networks, Mc Neill posits that there will follow an increase in the human realization of coincidence.

Compared with other forms of symbolic interpretation, for example tea leaf or hexagram readings, Mc Neill suggests that words provide immediate access to an understanding of future events:

It’s a form of augury that literally cuts to the chase. Random rearrangements of cards, coins, dice, bones, animal guts, etc. require interpretation. With words, the meaning is direct. You have the answer in writing. Future events can be held accountable to their word. Given that such accountability does occur, the concept of life as pre-recorded script gains credence (OWF, 115).

Words can in fact be fragile, duplicitous and disingenuous. If you agree with Mc Neill that the meaning of words is direct, then it’s fair to posit that by extension, the *possibility* of a correspondence between events as they may be “pre-recorded” within the word/image track and present-day occurrences may be realized. But how much of a word’s interpretation relies on the webs of significance⁵ within which a subject resides, and how much does a subject’s context impact accountability? The inherent circularity and solipsism that this view implies leaves room at the very least for radical philosophical scepticism.

In an article written by Burroughs for [Crawdaddy](#) magazine based on meetings between Burroughs and Led Zeppelin’s Jimmy Page, Burroughs states, “If you consider any set of data without a preconceived viewpoint, then a viewpoint will emerge from the data.” The information’s all there—it just needs to be aggregated and analyzed into meaningful forms. Mc Neill suggests,

...The patterns and organizing principles of synchronous events are revealing themselves. If there is a reason above all for acknowledging the events that occurred in *Ah Pook is Here*, it is to contribute to that endeavour...Hopefully, this book establishes a few more *tangible* coordinates, a few more dots, for someone else to join (OWF, 134).

Maybe this explains what the hell I’m trying to accomplish by writing this piece.

⁴ *The Yagé Letters Redux* (YLR), p. 50

⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973

Burroughs' insights into writing are reassuring: we use words to see what words can do. I'm just considering the data.

As practitioners of magic, both Burroughs and Mc Neill fall outside of any orthodox spiritual institution. Though many of Mc Neill's associations seem closely aligned to the Jungian notion of synchronicity, no mention is made of a corollary belief in the existence of the collective unconscious or of an essentially archetypal universe. Throughout his life, Burroughs actively sought out ways to try and explain his world, though he tended to selectively adopt findings of the various pseudoscientific frameworks he encountered—including psychoanalysis, Scientology, Wilhelm Reich's orgone energy treatments, and Alfred Korzybski's non-Aristotelian general semantics.

In considering the irony involved in Burroughs' funeral taking place in a traditionally Christian environment, only to be followed up with a Tibetan Nyingma Buddhist *bardo* ceremony afterwards, Mc Neill pinpoints what he sees as Burroughs' ideological disposition:

Mixing and matching spiritual conviction in this way suggests an à la carte, more discriminating view of religion. The use of specific ritual, however, contradicts the idea. It succumbs to the same superstition—the same great fear con laid down by organized religions from the get-go. The system of Control and spiritual undermining Bill had condemned throughout his career. As he pointed out in *Ah Pook*, there are no rules, no procedures, no correct *words*, for reliably dealing with *this* life, let alone the next (98).

It's not a stretch to suggest that by most peoples' standards even today, Burroughs' life was highly unconventional. In terms of the psychic space he inhabited, there was little censorship involved in Burroughs' writing. His ability to question the controlling ethos and orthodoxy of the *literati* challenged a generation of writers and beyond to think differently about writing.

Part 2

Ah Pook is Here—play by play



Image of Ah Puch from the Dresden Codex

Ah Puch is the Mayan god of death and king of the underworld, Metnal. He is represented as a corpse or skeleton wearing bells, sometimes possessing the head of an owl, a death omen in Mayan culture (LAAP, 15).

The spelling “Ah Pook” is a variation of “Ah Puch,” most likely changed to eliminate any awkwardness arising in the pronunciation of the name.

What is the story of *Ah Pook is Here*? Even reading the text several times doesn't necessarily provide a definitive answer. Mc Neill goes a long way to clarifying the question, though in the process he also raises further questions.

What follows is a high-level description of scenes from the text in the order that they appear—along with some commentary—and cross-referenced with images from *The Lost Art of Ah Pook* in an attempt to contextualize the art within Burroughs' narrative framework. If the scenes seem to be disjointed, well, that's because they are—even in the original text.

Foreword

In the foreword to *Ah Pook is Here*, Burroughs elucidates the notion of death as an organism that reproduces itself through life. His premise: “The Mayan codices are undoubtedly books of the dead; that is to say, directions for time travel” (APIHOT,15). Unpacking this phrase involves an understanding of Burroughs' conceptions of time and control.

As Mc Neill explains it, given the current state of humanity and the world at large, it's hard to imagine that human civilization is sustainable. This may suggest that the *real* reasons for reality (as we know it) to be unfolding as it is have something to do with a design beyond our usual assumptions.

God? *Naaaahh*...Perhaps there exists an entity—Burroughs calls it Control—that feeds on death. The propagation of life is the means towards an end; to cultivate lived experience. Through the process of living life, “limited” (as opposed to absolute) time is cultivated. Relatively speaking, death cannot live without the existence of time. Conversely, as Burroughs puts it: “Time has no meaning without death. Death uses time.” And “time is that which ends” (*APIHOT*,15-16). By extension, in order for Control to feed on death, death must have a human host in the form of lived experience.

The Mayans predicated their worldview on their relationship to time, as it manifested itself in worldly events such as the rising of the sun, the phases of the moon, the seasons and their relationship to the cultivation of crops. Author Ronald Wright points out,

Inquiry into the mystery of time has been called the soul of Maya culture. Their very name is cognate with *may*, a word for “cycle”—so the Maya can truly be called the people of time (TAM, 28).

Burroughs postulates that the Mayan priestly class intentionally exercised fear and control over illiterate workers, for through their authority the priests could continue to reproduce the priestly caste in future generations without fear of reprisal. Following Burroughs' premise that the Mayan codices are directions for time travel, he continues: ‘If you see reincarnation as a fact then the question arises: how does one orient oneself with regard to future lives?’ (*APIHOT*,15).

In *Observed While Falling*, Mc Neill provides an acute description of reincarnation:

Reincarnation, as it's commonly perceived, is an emotionally charged subject for which there can be no conclusive argument for or against. It's a spiritual palliative evoked by the same sense of apparent meaninglessness and inequality that prompts other compensatory visions of afterlife. In the case of reincarnation, an elaborate system of checks and balances in which each completed life is compensated or penalized according to the conditions experienced, then returned to suffer the consequences of misdemeanors or enjoy the pleasures previously denied. It's a personal conviction that cannot be gainsaid or disproved, since it is predicated on faith (*OWF*, 133).

Mc Neill's clinical stance is refreshing, though correspondences between his own life and one past life in particular suggest that there may be instances where at least a *relationship* to them is troublingly difficult to deny. The question remains: what is the nature of that relationship?

Opening scene

Immediately prior to the bombing of Hiroshima, two Japanese boys are looking at a porn magazine and are masturbating. In a parallel scene, a couple is having sex. The bomb explodes. (*LAAP*, 33, 84-85) Who *actually* gave the order to drop the bomb? CONTROL.

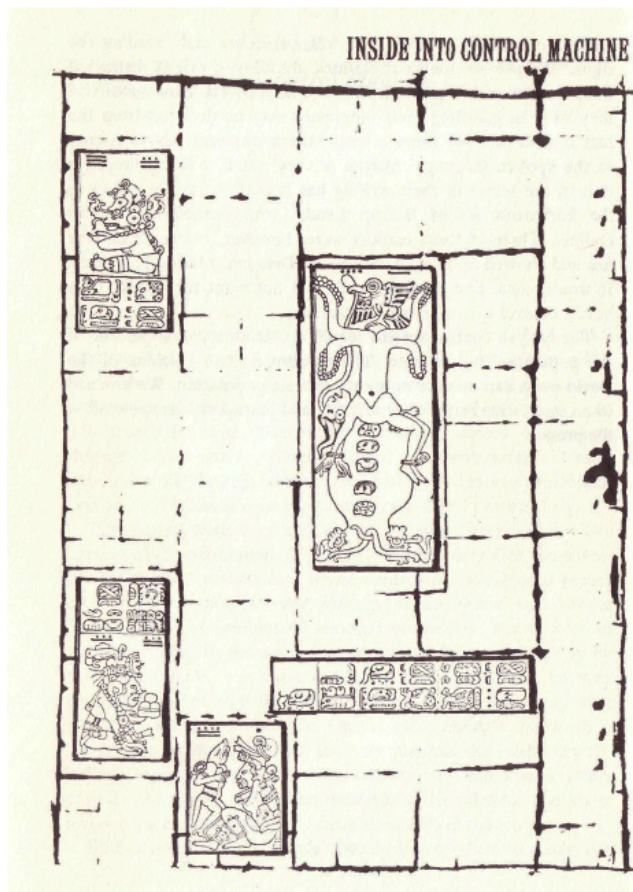
The explanation goes like this:

You see, I was building up an identikit picture of the man...probably a Mayan scholar...certainly rich...obviously obsessed with immortality...Perhaps a Rosetta Stone exists. Perhaps some of the codices survived the book burnings of Bishop Landa. Could this man have discovered those books and learned the secrets of the Mayan Control Calendar? The secrets of fear and death? And is this terrible knowledge even now computerized and vested in the hands of the far-sighted Americans in the State Department and the CIA? (*APIHOT*, 22)

John Stanley Hart

In “Inside the Control Machine” from *The Third Mind* (TM), Burroughs reflects on the power dynamic between Mayan priests and peasants, drawing a parallel to modern civilization:

The Mayan control system required that ninety-nine percent of the population be illiterate. The modern control machine of the world press can operate only on a literate population. We proceed to an interesting series of repetitions and juxtapositions detected in the press (TM, 92).



Spread from "Inside the Control Machine." *The Third Mind*, 92-93

29 heavy bombers hit Vietcong and 29 killed a week later in Saigon terror bombing ... June 29 ... Plane loses engine ... Stocks in worst fall since 63 ... Airlines suffer most, ... June 14, Sydney, Australia ... Ship sinks under all-female crew ... Quimm and the 3 girls with him were rescued ... June 27, Guatemala City. 3 girls aboard Cochran boat on fatal trip ... (Through council the youth model returning from the post pleaded innocent by agreement with office ... Her lawyer and district soldier husband in Vietnam Nee Bernard Smith when opposite direction adjourned today pending a 3-ton boulder bounced separate from a passing truck and crushed her convertible defense) ... June 29, Godsmith had high praise for the police who "worked like dogs" ... When the hunt started a veteran cop described the young toughs as "a pack of mad dogs" ... (He kicked the small brown-and-white terrier and sent it sprawling.) ... July 14, New York *Post*. ... "Call Him Rover" A Lexington, Ky., father purchased a dog license for his son Stephen, 15, because he wouldn't cut his Beatle bangs. New hearts? Better rains? Rare

Recommend a restaurant? Is not personal opinion ... Ding dong bell Sell! Sell! Sell! Tele Con Polaroid mutter spell fell. ... Old Tower fell. ... Syntex Halliburton Sub Swan fell ... Sell! Sell! Sell! God damned floating warehouse! Death was the navigator ... So unyieldingly gay was the indicator's digital fish boy that the President's mother and process control hauled inertial heavy metal junkies from cocktail parties to unload their radium-doped panoramic indicators and the star-spangled omnidirectional deep freeze was rejected as irrelevant under circumstances that retroactively congealed the San Francisco earthquake and the Halifax explosion and doubt released from the skin law extendable and ravenous consumed all the facts of history ... Dr Isbell and his research staff carry out experiments to establish the addictive liability of "decorticated canine preparations" (In the family, he was known simply as "the dog.") *Note:* Decorticated canine preparations are dogs whose brain cortex has been surgically removed at the direction of Dr Isbell, head of research at the federal hospital in Lexington, Ky., where he had

The text follows with a word collage constructed from newspaper articles and headlines, highlighting the media's propensity for communicating world events as an instrument to deliver fear and control.

In *Ah Pook is Here*, John Stanley Hart is characterized as a megalomaniac—he's loosely based on newspaper syndicate publishing giant of the early 20th century, Randolph Hearst—whose intent is to control humanity through media manipulation and the imposition of a didactic, monotheistic religious view of reality—analogue to the dominant conservative values of the western world—on its subjects.

Hart's quest for power begins when as a child, he resolves he will live forever. As an adult, Hart studies at Harvard. He "dedicates himself to immortal studies" (APIHOT, 22, LAAP 88-89) beginning with the Egyptians, then studying the ancient Mayans. While examining the Dresden Codex (LAAP 12-13), Hart catches a glimpse of death; he is driven to find out more.

Convinced that there exist ancient books that hold "the secrets of fear and death," Hart and his oldest friend Clinch Smith go in search of these tomes at the site of ancient Mayan ruins. The books are discovered in a temple with skeletons of the dead wrapped around them. Clinch Smith suggests that the magic the books possess should be used for the betterment of humankind.

Hart disagrees, murders Smith and takes the books for himself (LAAP, 27, 34-35, 86, 87). Hart realizes that Smith's family will know that it is he who murdered Smith, and sets out to murder the rest of the family. Mrs. Smith reportedly dies in a car crash; her son Guy Smith escapes to South America to live in hiding. Mr. Hart then takes a train back to New York. While riding on the train, he begins to examine the Mayan codices in greater detail.

The Gods escape

They are all there...the gods are listed off as Mr. Hart identifies them in his trove of manuscripts. "Look at these poisonous color maps where flesh trees grow from human sacrifices" (APIHOT, 29, LAAP, 90). The images in the codices are unleashed; the pictograms come to life with Mr. Hart's witnessing the power and significance of these symbols. Suddenly, "Mr. Hart coughs violently and covers his face with a handkerchief" (APIHOT, 29, LAAP, 90).

The “Polar Star God” disguises himself as a train porter and offers Mr. Hart some tea, which Hart accepts (LAAP, 90). Staring outside the train window, Mr. Hart witnesses a travelling carnival. He sees the Vulture God inhabiting one of the carnival booths, standing in front of a naked youth on his knees with an erection, wearing a dog mask. The Vulture God makes eye contact with Mr. Hart, laughs and emulates a cough in mockery of Mr. Hart.

The carnival booths assume the narrative function of panels in sequence, with the youth appearing in the next booth sprayed with decay from the Vulture God’s cough, the dog mask now melded to his face. In the following booth, the youth’s physical appearance has deteriorated even further. In his sickly form, he “fucks a black woman in a kneeling position, his body giving off a dry musty smell. And they are both humming a frequency that sets a spoon rattling in the saucer” (APIHOT, 30).

A snake-bird mermaid in an aquarium weaves through a “gelatinous material” and metamorphoses into a “male twin,” then passes through the substance again and turns back into a female. Without notice, a carnival spectator jumps into the substance and also assumes the form of her male twin. “The two twins turn bright red with pleasure and twist in rainbow copulations” (APIHOT, 30).

Further hallucinatory machinations ensue. By the time Mr. Hart returns to New York, the gods have all escaped. Little is left in the Mayan codices other than “fear and death.” Mr. Hart intends on occupying a space in the Mayan pantheon as “Hunab Ku The One Divine” (APIHOT, 31). Hunab Ku, an unseen god due to his never assuming a physical form,

was in short the operator of the control machine and in consequence did not include himself as data...However, having reprogrammed the machine to eliminate the troublesome ‘good’ Gods and those of ambiguous allegiance, Mr. Hart will soon encounter an acute time shortage. DEATH now freed from all control will use up all the TIME. And any control machine needs time...(APIHOT, 31).

As the “human instrument of Control” (OWF, 116), Hart will use every imaginable technique to manage human experience. Consider the following:

- We think in images. “Mr. Hart has *all the pictures*” (APIHOT, 36).
- We hear words or sounds. The Whisperer “...can imitate any voice and make Jones whisper out the dirtiest sex words from ten feet away (APIHOT, 37, LAAP 72).”
- We have feelings: “Fear is the pictures of *your* fear. Show someone a picture of himself in a state of fear and you put him in a state of fear (APIHOT, 33).

Political scientist Gene Sharp put it this way⁶:

- Obedience is essentially voluntary.
- It is not sanctions themselves which produce obedience, but the fear of them.

Mr. Hart’s “anti-dream plan” (APIHOT, 32) includes the *Oriental Exclusion Act*, income tax laws, and the *Harrison Narcotics Act*. Mr. Hart explores the use of viruses as a means of control, but settles instead on researching Electric Brain Stimulation: “...just install your electrodes at birth and your control is now complete” (APIHOT, 40).

Mr. Hart feeds on fear and control; it is his junk.

Imagine that there is a limited amount of control in your world. Your goal is to gain as much of that control as possible. The way that you accumulate greater and greater amounts of control is through invoking fear in more and more people. You scare them with pictures, negative voices and feelings, instilling in them a deep and enduring sense of insecurity.

⁶ *The Politics of Nonviolent Action: Volume 1: Power and Struggle*. Extending Horizon Books, 1973, pp. 26, 28.
Falling into Place: Wayfinding with Malcolm Mc Neill and William S. Burroughs

heel before it can prepare to attack once more. The snake's egg lies in its nest; Cumhu picks it up, and the egg is absorbed into his skin, whereupon further hallucinations ensue.

An idyllic scene in the country. A cottage. Some of the phrases found in these passages are repeated virtually verbatim in the prose poem that follows soon afterwards in the text, with references to the "snake of stars."

Burning cities...crowds running and screaming diseased faces...Suddenly the crowd sees him with the egg in his hand...Snatching up stones and clubs they run towards him screaming, 'FEVER EGG...' (APIHOT, 44, LAAP, 36-37, 82-83).

Cumhu throws the egg and it bursts in the air, spraying the crowd below. Young delinquents break into a storefront and find "...devices that look like pinball machines with a machine gun..." (APIHOT, 45, LAAP, 83). They fire them at one another and instantly become sex-driven perverts. The youth choose to turn the machines on the crowds outside:

People are tearing their clothes off, fucking in doorways, taxis, shops and on the streets and sidewalks...Police cars and cops and ambulance attendants are drawn into a twister of frenzied flesh that heaves around the statue of Eros...(APIHOT, 45, LAAP 78-81, 110, 166, OWF, cover).

When Cumhu's drug-induced fantasy subsides, he realizes that the Painless Ones are in fact the undead; "They are the souls of renegade junky priests" (APIHOT, 46). This explains their indifference to both pleasure and pain; the Yellow Drug allows them to maintain their immunity to Control.

In the same way that "time is running out" as more and more of it is accumulated, so too do the amounts of available pleasure and pain associated with embodying a human host diminish as the priests kill in greater and greater numbers—to the point where no more life can be taken. At this juncture, the priests become the Painless Ones. They have killed themselves through overconsumption:

You see in order to replace life he must live it, that is, experience pleasure and pain, that is, identify with the host he will kill. When he ceases to identify with the host he is killing himself (APIHOT, 46).

God sex

Burroughs suggests that the lost books of the Mayans included frequent representations of the gods conducting intercourse, one of the reasons for which they were burned by Bishop Landa. The sex act in this context becomes an additional vehicle for the gods to inhabit a human host. The Foreword to *Ah Pook is Here* explains that in the Dresden Codex,

Familiarity with death and consequent immunity is conveyed by actual copulation. A glyph depicts the Moon Goddess copulating with a death figure, and we may assume that the books destroyed by Bishop Landa contained many such scenes (APIHOT, 17).

Following the introduction of the Painless Ones in *Ah Pook is Here*, Ixtab, the Goddess of Ropes and Snares, mistakenly attempts to seduce the Painless Ones, only to realize that they are like herself. To inhabit a host through the act of copulation, the host must be a living being.

A series of confrontations with death assuming different forms follows— in one cryptic account, "Ah Pook kills the young Corn God and Ah Pook stands there in a standoff, coming around the other way" (APIHOT, 46). Death comes from all directions.

In an Oedipal moment, Cumhu kills his father and steals his father's ancient, sacred books. In his last dying words, Cumhu's father admonishes his son for breaching the sacred covenant, unlawfully traveling back in time (LAAP, 100).

"While Mr. Hart is making all the mistakes in the book the boys are moving into the present time position" (APIHOT, 46). A showdown looms in the distance.



LAAP, 108-110

Poetic injection

At this point in the narrative, Burroughs inserts a 21-line prose poem. It is an odd inclusion, an intermission between two acts, an ode anticipating events to follow. In brief, the poem paints a picture of spoor diffusing through the air, an odourless cloud burning any life travelling in its path. As the spoor spreads through a desolate town, it begins to develop an acrid fragrance. Laughter from “le Comte” (literally translated from the French, “The Count”—*counting time*) can be heard in the distance.

Death sex

In *Ah Pook is Here*, death engaged in human sexual activity is a symbolically charged motif tethered to the notion of “buying more time.” In the foreword, Burroughs remarks on the relationship between death and the dying:

This identification may take the form of actual copulation with death. Death, who can take either male or female form, fucks the young Corn God and the Corn God ejaculates 400 million years of corn from seed to harvest and back. This operation requires actual corn and an actual human body to represent the young Corn God (APIHOT, 17).

In the first scene following Burroughs’ poem, Audrey Carsons is described as “standing in for the young Corn God.” Carsons is accompanied by “the buck-toothed young Death God, Chinese Mexican Mayan I don’t know Japanese person sometimes young old street old street boy face. He is the Dib, Anubis the Jackal God” (APIHOT, 47, LAAP, 23).

Now the scene is a desolate Palm Beach. Everyone’s wearing jock straps. In the midst of a scene of arid desertion, we hear the singing of “thousands of robins” (APIHOT, 47). A Painless One named Jimmy the Shrew arrives on a bicycle. He has been using the Yellow Drug, and is now sick with leprosy. He fucks himself back to health, using Audrey Carsons as his vehicle for wellness (LAAP, 38-39).

The boys discover a menswear store where they pick out some stylish early 20th century suits to protect themselves from the impending cold. Audrey Carsons coughs up blood: he is showing signs of contracting tuberculosis (LAAP, 101-102).

As the boys travel through town, they encounter an animal resembling a cross between “a porcupine and an opossum,” which Dib calls a Lulow. A bad omen (APIHOT, 49, LAAP, 101).

They find a diner inhabited by the local lowlife. In the diner, Audrey Carsons approaches an old Chinese man and speaks an arcane phrase in Chinese that he’s used to ill effect in the past, as it was poorly received. This time in response, he is told to go to the Globe Hotel. In the hotel, a Japanese man and a black man, both hooligans, exchange gold from The Dib for two semi-automatic pistols with silencers and bullets; two blue eggs, roughly the same size as a robin’s; and drugs to sustain Audrey Carsons’ condition (LAAP, 22). They clear out in a hurry (LAAP, 103).

Narcs bust into a hippy pad. In a parallel scene, narcs burst in on two lesbians making love and cuff them. Now Audrey and Dib are fucking and are also attacked. The two eggs are thrown toward the narcs and the narcs instantly disintegrate.



LAAP, 110-112

Meanwhile, back at the mansion...

Mr. Hart's estate. For a dinner party, Mr. Hart is cross-referencing his guest list with those in attendance. He notices Audrey Carsons' name on the list; then he notices signs of deterioration on his cheekbone. In a private room Mr. Hart frantically begins to try to eradicate the marks using cosmetic creams and lotions. Hart recollects a letter published in one of his newspapers from one Mrs. Murphy (who also makes appearances in Burroughs' *The Soft Machine*). She expresses no remorse—in fact a certain glib satisfaction—in the fact that a guard dog was reported to have almost killed a four-year-old child while doing its job.

Audrey and the Dib are now retreating from down the stairs of the room they were just in when they were ambushed by the narcs. Mrs. Murphy happens to live in the building, and comes out from her room in the hopes that she will see the two boys taken away in cuffs by the authorities. Instead she's shot in the temple.

Mr. Hart is now onto the boys, and unleashes the full force of the police at his disposal. In an airport, Audrey is disguised as a naval reserve officer and the Dib his pregnant wife. Old Sarge and Cumhu, Jimmy, and Xolotl assume the identity of United Nations ambassadors. Guy is disguised as Old Sarge's son, and Ouab stands in as a nuclear scientist.

The group raises the alarm when one of them walks through a metal detector. A security team appears with machine guns, but an order from the FBI to hold fire allows the group to board their plane. As Audrey and the Dib order the pilots to take off, virus B-23 is unleashed on the city below. Carnage ensues, with dead bodies strewn across the surface of the earth.

The barracks

Barrack outside St. Louis, Missouri, windows boarded up and overgrown with vines. Jimmy, Cumhu, Audrey, Ouab, the Dib and young Guy are sleeping on army cots (APIHOT, 54).

Old Sarge orders his compatriots to "fuck out some weaponry" (APIHOT, 54). In spite of an ancient law forbidding sex between Cumhu and Xolotl, they indulge. A "pulsing black egg" appears:

The egg cracks and a Black Captain steps out. These beings are black all over, even the teeth, huge eyes black and shiny, the pupil glowing like a distant star with a faint cold light (APIHOT, 54).

The hotel

The Black Fever is unleashed. Its effects emulate having a reaction to being stung by a swarm of bees. Mrs. Worldly arrives at a posh hotel and is greeted at the reception desk by Audrey Carsons. When Mrs. Worldly tries to check in, Carsons tells her that he's never heard of her. She expresses outrage, and promptly her body swells and explodes. Audrey orders the bellboys in the lobby to carry what remains of her body outside.

Back at the barracks...

Now Old Sarge orders Audrey and Ouab to “...fuck out a red biologic on the double” (APIHOT, 55). From out of a pink egg emerges a [Reddie](#), a boy with female breasts.

The American First rally and beyond

At an American First rally, Reddies in Boy Scout outfits defecate on the podium and use the flag to wipe themselves. Suffering from the Red Fever, blood explodes from the Reddies’ mouths and assholes as they collapse on the ground, simultaneously releasing “Acid Leprosy” from their armpits (APIHOT, 56).

A posse on its way from the south lynches anything challenging them along the way. The posse is headed off and destroyed by the Reddies. Disease spreads uncontrollably worldwide, and death no longer controls time. “The biologic bank is open” (APIHOT, 56). Cross-fertilization between species brings new forms of mutant life into existence at an unprecedented rate.

Climax

The following scenes begin by presenting parallel events taking place with Guy Smith and Audrey Carsons in a point and counterpoint format. Even if you’ve read Burroughs before and you’re familiar with his regular inclusion of homoerotic sexual content, you can only truly get a sense of the extremity and outrageousness of *Ah Pook is Here*’s grand finale if the frequency of “boy” references is made explicit.

Guy Smith wakes up from a phantasmagorical erotic dream:

In a broken strawberry a red bat boy sprawls with his legs up.
A green shrew boy with trembling ears jacks him off...Fish boys in sky boats towed by singing fish...
Bird boys with fragile gliders over burning suburbs cross with car lights...
A fibrous plant boy rides a giant rat in a Mayan swamp and cuddles the baby Corn God (APIHOT, 57).

Audrey Carsons recalls a scene from his young adulthood, in which he passes through a rite of initiation to enter a “tree house gang.” He is fucked by a Mexican kid and passes out at the same time as he ejaculates.

The red bat boy, fully erect and coated with a musky lubricant all over his body, jumps from an extraordinary distance and lands between Guy’s legs.

Cumhu positions himself behind Audrey and pulls down Audrey’s pants:

Flesh stick turned in his ass by a boy with a blue egg growing from his back as he propels a boat with blue farts.
Boy bent over with a flute up his ass played by a balloon-cheeked musician (APIHOT, 58, LAAP, 64).

A lean boy with bad skin sticks a steering wheel up Audrey’s ass. As Audrey ejaculates, an ensemble of car horns sounds.

A boy crouching on his hands and knees is flogged with rose switches:

Boys fuck a transparent fish in an orange pod eating oranges the juice dripping from their mouths blown away in orange clouds over the ruins of Palm Beach...(APIHOT, 59).

The bat boy fucks Guy and the two meld into one being.

Boy with flaring bat ears bent over with a flute up his ass his body spattered with red itching hairs and opalescent acne as he ejaculates gurgles of light...
Boys vomit blood and roses over outhouses where boys jack off spurting robins and blue birds...(APIHOT, 59).

The tree house: Audrey bites into a blue fruit—seemingly with a will of its own—and his skin colour changes to the bright blue of a peacock. He is launched into a fantastic scene:

A blue egg growing from his spine pops butterflies blue birds and strange-winged creatures over the ruined suburbs where screaming crowds run below him (APIHOT, 60, LAAP, 66-67, 110).

Boys with birds flying out the ass in the black and sepia puffs are eaten by a blue bird demon and shit out ejaculating in blue pods...

Boy with quivering blue flesh is sucked into a bell under a gallows...

...Cumhu fucks the Painless One and they streak across the sky like a rocket.

Boys with fragile glider jetted by nitrous farts that billow out autumn leaves and fades sepia photos...

A boy whipped with a transparent fish sprouts fish wings... (APIHOT, 60).

The provocative imagery continues. Old Sarge and the Dib fly by in an antique biplane and wave from above.

Cherubim blow golden horns up the ass of boys with legs spread the scrotum a huge pink egg in which a red cock pulses...

The eggs explode in a musky purple smell of incense and ozone, trailing clusters of violet light...(APIHOT, 60-61).

And then it all ends. The boys are boarding a ship, the *Mary Celeste*, and sailing off into the sunset. A journalist asks what has become of Mr. Hart. Audrey directs the reporter's view toward the wall of Mr. Hart's manor in the distance. Graffiti adorns its walls:

AH POOK WAS HERE.

Here lived a stupid vulgar son of a bitch who
thought he could hire DEATH as a company cop (APIHOT, 61).

The end

The final scenes in *Ah Pook is Here* come across more as orgiastic hyperbole than a serious treatment of the premises presented in the foreword to the text, and their embodiment in the form of John Stanley Hart. Once the shock value wears off, what are you left with? It's an important question to ask of Burroughs' fictional prose. You could call it weird gay porn, were it not the case that the imagery is so poetic. What happened?

Burroughs drew a parallel between the rigid control system of the ancient Mayan priests and modern western civilization. *Ah Pook is Here* was designed to serve as a parable demonstrating the similarities between the two empires, and the inescapability of western civilization's collapse based on its current trajectory.

Mc Neill suggests that (ritualized violence in the form of sacrifices aside) the evangelical, Judeo-Christian, positivistic, and military-industrial perspectives that inform Eurocentric values are in diametrical opposition with Mayan culture. The indigenous worldview recognizes the connectedness and interrelationship between all things. The European march through time toward "progress" in the form of resource extraction and the expansion of the empire is in contradiction with the notion of time standing still, and would have been unintelligible to the Maya.

In describing the initial logic behind Burroughs' "argument," Mc Neill remarks:

The battle against 'evil' cannot be won, simply because the concept of *good* relies entirely on *bad* in order to exist. Everything is determined by that which it is not. In order for bad to be banished from the world, good would have to go with it. The only way such an idea can be removed from human experience is by removing humans altogether. By *truly* "ending human consciousness as we know it." Given the mind-numbing insanity that prevails, this is not such a bad idea.

It was the conclusion of *Ah Pook is Here* (OWF, 121).

The conclusion serves as a critique of Control, and "According to Bill, like all mundane systems of control, it contains within its methods the seeds of its own destruction (OWF, 117).

It is not the *only* conclusion, however—and the conclusion that found its way into the Calder publication is hardly what one would expect, based on developments in the early pages of *Ah Pook is Here*.

In a letter to Bryon Gysin—written by Burroughs from Paris on October 30, 1973—Burroughs explained,

Malcolm Mc Neill has left for San Francisco to finish the book there and I wrote a bang up kiss kiss bang bang ending just as you suggested⁷.

Mc Neill expresses his dissatisfaction with Burroughs' ending:

It's only religious indoctrination that suggests that all other life on earth is somehow inferior. The human ideals of care, altruism, and sincerity are all clearly evidenced in the rest of nature. Boredom, duplicity, and the need to control, on the other hand, are not. The added disappointment of *Ah Pook's* conclusion to me was that Bill, in his text-only version, reneged on that idea (OWF, 121).

According to this perspective, compassion is expressed in nature through the relatively peaceful coexistence of species in a delicate balance with one another, based on ecological principles. Suggesting an alternative to the uniquely dialectical worldview expressed in Burroughs' representation of Control did not find its way into the actual conclusion to *Ah Pook is Here*. Rather, Burroughs chose to lapse into a rhapsodic sexualized reverie.

Not only that, but the scenes Burroughs describes were largely inspired by Mc Neill's artwork, and not the other way around:

A series of sex scenes had been tacked on to the end—male-to-male sex, obviously. I'd used ejaculated birds, bats and other creatures as a *graphic* transitional device in the sequence after Virus B23, but now they were presented literally. Young guys actually ejaculating goldfish, cherries, and so on. And now there were bat boys with flutes up their asses, Audrey with a rubber steering wheel up his ass, and boys on hang gliders powered by "nitrous farts."

All the old human conditions had been destroyed forever, but the 'tree house' remained intact. It wasn't disturbing anymore, just depressing (OWF, 87).

The seeds of a moral imperative lie buried deep within *Ah Pook is Here*. Due to the experimental nature of Burroughs' prose, his fantastic subject matter, and the virtual absence of any complex character development in the story, it is impossible for the reader to identify (on a personal level) with any of the personae who populate his text. Burroughs' writing has been ghettoized by academics as "postmodern," though Burroughs was not consciously reacting to the modernist literary aesthetic. Due to the inaccessibility of the author's prose, interpreting *Ah Pook is Here* is necessarily a predominantly intellectual activity, as opposed to involving empathy or a combination of an empathetic and intellectual reading. It could even be argued that Burroughs' preoccupation with sex is a form of psychological displacement, compensating for his lack of emotional intimacy with others, as is best evidenced by the estranged relationship he had with his son, William S. Burroughs Jr. (Billy).⁸

Reading *Observed While Falling*, however, situates *Ah Pook is Here* within the context of Malcolm Mc Neill's personal experience, providing the reader with a tangible reference point through which to access and identify with the material. That said, *Observed by Falling* is a highly conceptual work. The level of abstraction and free form association found in Mc Neill's personal story is unusual for a memoir—but this is an unusual tale. Mc Neill is as compelling, playful and talented a writer as he is an artist. Consider the following passage, in which Mc Neill lapses into a poetic circumscription of his story's myriad tangents:

What's in an image?

What's in a word?

Art, art not. Drawing, pulling, gravity, grave. Now here, nowhere. Current, flow. Influence, confluence, coincidence. Correspondence. Circuit. Current, present. Pre-sent. Past *before* us. Gving way. Tidings (OWF, 130).

There is a heavy personal commitment present in *Observed While Falling* as well. In the Los Angeles County Museum of Art show, *William Burroughs: Ports of Entry*, which included 150 "illustrations *for*, and images created in collaboration *with*" (OWF, 105) William S. Burroughs, no mention was made of Mc Neill's collaborations with Burroughs. Nor were Mc Neill's collaborations with Burroughs mentioned in the "ten-page bibliography, filmography, and discography at the back" of the 192-page publication accompanying the show (OWF, 105). The disappointment Mc Neill rightly expresses from the absence of any acknowledgment of his contributions with Burroughs is palpable.

⁷ *Rub out the words: The Letters of William S. Burroughs 1959-1974*. Ecco, 2012.

⁸ See *Cursed from Birth: The Short, Unhappy Life of William S. Burroughs, Jr.* Soft Skull Press, 2006.

Tracking time

... *The Unspeakable Mr. Hart* ... dinosaurs, electronic gadgets, Mayans...
... *Mr. Hart, Clinch Smith, Harvard, Egyptian art, Mayan art* ...
... *cops, cadavers, executions, newspapers* ... (OWF, 17)

It's all in there. If you haven't read the text of *Ah Pook is Here*, you might find it hard to believe—and it's most likely next to impossible to draw inferences from the bold italic passages that riddle the first part to *Observed While Falling*, entitled "Bill Burroughs." Those passages have become increasingly familiar to me, now that my own relationship to the text is bordering on intimate after nine months of reading Burroughs, reading *about* Burroughs, and trying to make sense of *Ah Pook is Here*, *Observed While Falling* and *The Lost Art of Ah Pook is Here*.

But what does it all mean? Even though Burroughs wasn't motivated by an overtly political agenda, he nonetheless managed to challenge the literary orthodoxy of his day through the unique approach that he took in his writing. He defied genre; his personal history and the marginal subcultures through which he navigated informed his work, and in turn through his work's existence the dominant culture and its colonial values were questioned.

Those bold italic passages—interspersed through *Observed While Falling*—track Mc Neill's process as he created artwork using various points of entry into the text of *Ah Pook is Here*. They are interspersed with references to Mc Neill's artistic progress and publishing developments along the way.

Access to the text of *Ah Pook is Here* allows the reader to recognize how Mc Neill's artwork elucidates and illuminates Burroughs' words, bringing them to life. Many of Mc Neill's drawings are not just randomly generated, fantasy-inspired images; they are a *literal* interpretation of Burroughs' descriptions.

Access to the text also allows us to see how Mc Neill expanded *Ah Pook is Here* by taking Burroughs' writing in new directions through his unique visual composition, sequencing and stylization. The *absence* of a literal correlation between the text and some of the art in *The Lost Art of Ah Pook* makes one recognize that Mc Neill was also responding to Burroughs' writing on a visceral, emotional level. The artwork resonates because it is *in tune* with the text.

For the text to be cleaved from the artwork is simultaneously the intriguing and frustrating quality in the story of *Ah Pook is Here*. In his [White Review](#) interview, Malcolm Mc Neill put it this way:

When the Europeans destroyed the Mayan culture the language became undecipherable. The textual narrative was gone. All that remained were the images – the architecture, sculpture, murals and a handful of incomplete books. One of those books inspired *Ah Pook is Here*: a book of words and images about a book of words and images in which the narrative had been lost. Forty years later *Ah Pook is Here* has become that book. It has realized its own idea.



LAAP, 92

Part 3

Conversations with a dead man

AND YOU ASK ME why I do not believe in psychic events?

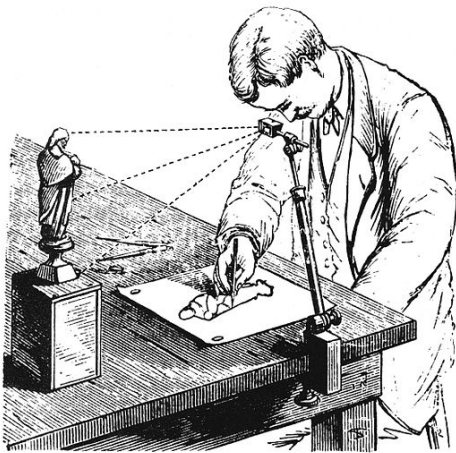
How can I not believe? you may ask given what I have seen, what I have learned.

And it occurs to me that I cannot provide for an adequate answer, because I do not believe the proper words exist for me to explain my agnosticism. You cannot know, therefore, and neither it seems can I.

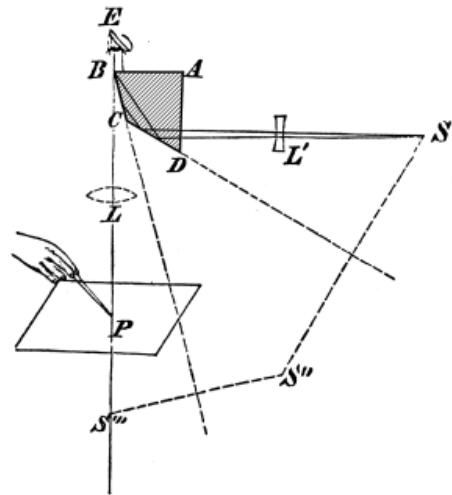
—Charles Pellegrino, *Titanic*

In 1839-40, the American explorer John Stephens planned a trip travelling through Honduras and Guatemala, then north to the ancient ruins of Palenque. At the time, the Palenque ruins were the only remnants of ancient Mayan civilization known to exist. Stephens also returned to Central America to explore the Yucatan region in 1843. An artist named Frederick Catherwood (1799-1854) accompanied Stephens on both trips and provided visual documentation of their travels.

When Malcolm Mc Neill first began researching the ancient Maya for image references, retrieving information was often a long, drawn-out process requiring trips to libraries or museums. He had stumbled upon drawings by Catherwood, but had no information about the artist. Nonetheless these drawings became inspiration for the realistic style used in the artwork for *Ah Pook is Here*. Catherwood used the *camera lucida* to accurately depict the ruins he drew, a technique that uses an optical lens to transpose a version of the image being drawn onto the artist's paper.



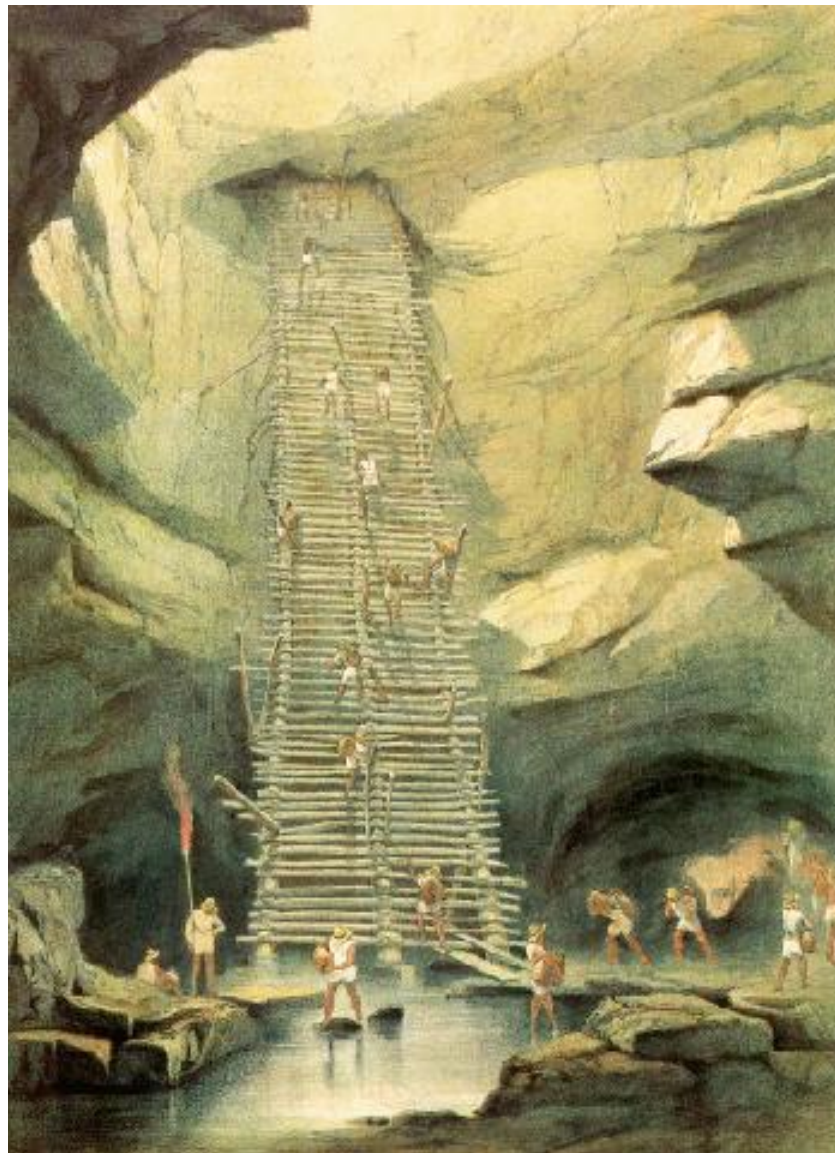
Camera lucida in use.



Optics of Wollaston camera lucida⁹

Two books, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* (1841) and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* (1843), and one watercolour folio, [Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan](#) (1844) were published on the basis of the adventurers' travels.

⁹ "Camera lucida in use" and "Optics of Wollaston camera lucida" are both images in the Public Domain. Wikimedia Commons. Falling into Place: Wayfinding with Malcolm Mc Neill and William S. Burroughs



Cenote Xtacumbilxunan, at Bolonchen, Yucatan by Frederick Catherwood.
First published in *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*
Image in the Public Domain. Wikimedia Commons.

It would be years later before Mc Neill would learn more about Catherwood, through a spontaneous decision to try and find out about him while conducting research at the Los Angeles County library. In 2003, Mc Neill discovered a biography of the artist called *The Lost Cities of the Mayas: the Life, Art and Discoveries of Frederick Catherwood* by Fabio Bourbon, which laid out a series of uncanny coincidences between Catherwood's life and Mc Neill's own:

...Frederick Catherwood was an English illustrator, and also of Scottish descent.
He also went to art school in London.
He also met an American writer who happened to be living in London at the time: John Lloyd Stephens.

Stephens had contacted Catherwood on the basis of his artwork and they too agreed to collaborate on a book together...
...about the Maya.

Catherwood met Stephens in Leicester Square. A few hundred yards down the road from Piccadilly where I met Bill. One "square" over, as it were...

It was an interesting discovery, but when it came down to it—so what? As I read on, however, the correspondences became so unlikely that they were hard to ignore. Catherwood also moved to America to complete the work—and, just as I had—slightly ahead of his writer partner...

In Manhattan, his first home—like mine—was on Houston Street...
He *also* had a studio in Tribeca...
Like me, he moved from there to Prince Street...

We both had children born in New York, and both of us were separated from our wives there. His son, also born in December, was 6 years old at the time—as was mine...

We both quit illustration there . . .

He subsequently moved to California, where he *too* became an American citizen. He while living in Solano County, me while living in Solano Canyon...

As artists we shared a particular image style: *panoramas*. In New York we both became known for it. Catherwood through his panoramic murals, which he exhibited in his rotunda on Prince Street, myself through the panoramic images I created for television—while *also* living on Prince Street.

...Ultimately, Catherwood produced a folio edition of their collaboration and wrote an account of their history and friendship together....an account that had been published *more than a century-and-a-half ago*.

That I would be duplicating aspects of a dead man's life was odd enough, but the nature of the coincidences and the manner in which they had been revealed evoked an even greater one (OWF, 107-108).

Recall the first two lines of *Ah Pook is Here*: "The Mayan codices are undoubtedly books of the dead; that is to say directions for time travel. If you see reincarnation as a fact, then the question arises; how does one orient oneself with regard to future lives?" The connection between the discovery of Catherwood and those two sentences was impossible to ignore. Had Mc Neill not recognized this coincidence, *Observed While Falling* would never have been written.

What are the chances? According to Burroughs' theory of the word/image track and the existence of a pre-recorded script for reality, "There's no such thing as a chance remark" (OWF, 108); the same would equally apply to *all* events.

On the basis of these coincidences, Mc Neill is led to the seemingly choiceless conclusion that Burroughs' assumptions about predestination are valid. He does so, however, not as a victim of circumstance, but as an active agent in the determination of the predetermined, and not without acknowledging the level of incredulity that his disposition entails. Mc Neill is driven to further explore the tenuous fabric of this existence, simultaneously acknowledging, "The nature of the informational exchange may be impossible to explain, but its effects are impossible to ignore" (OWF, 147).

The resurrection of *Ah Pook is Here* led to Mc Neill's establishing "...a *correspondence* with a dead man" (OWF, 149). *Ah Pook* was once again present in Mc Neill's life, and the lines between fact and fiction became blurred. In the absence of any clear direction regarding how to proceed, Mc Neill chose to follow his intuition. He decided to see where the first symbol that came to mind would lead him: *jungle*. The image was evocative of [entanglement](#):

The fictional Hart and his friend Clinch Smith searched for the lost Mayan books in a jungle. In real life, on the other side of the so-called line, Catherwood and Stephens had 'searched' for their Mayan books in the very *same* jungle...in *fact*.

Both of these expeditions had resulted in books being found, one fictionally and literally, the other factually and figuratively" (OWF, 113).

What follows is a digression that explores not just these associations, but also an in-depth examination of the Mayan conception of time, among other topics. Mc Neill describes a series of novels as well as a television program in which scenes imagined by their authors bear a remarkable resemblance to events that eventually transpired in

real life. The similarities are remarkable, and are presented as further fodder to support the word/image track hypothesis.

Mc Neill also explains how *Ah Pook is Here* predicted the methods of control practiced in the 21st century—the arsenal of surveillance techniques, news propaganda and police state fear-mongering present even in the most democratic of nations.

Next, Mc Neill expounds on the lunacy of the [2012 phenomenon](#), critiquing in particular the novel *2012: The War for Souls* by Whitley Strieber, an acquaintance of Burroughs.

A comparison of Mayan and European conceptions of time ensues. The western mechanistic conception of time treats its progression as a chronologically relentless march into the future. In contrast, the Mayan conception of time is variable, relational and experiential, while still acknowledging the cyclical pattern of terrestrial seasons. Mc Neill likens it to the human heart:

[The heart] also marks time incrementally and is without doubt the measure of life. But the measure is qualitative in that each beat is a direct response to the context in which it occurs. The rhythm changes according to the way time is experienced. It's both a barometer of time *felt* and an odometer measuring time *spent*. By implication, it's also an indicator of time yet remaining—and it was this feature that may have held significance for the Maya (OWF, 123).

The “significance” to which Mc Neill alludes involves the symbolic value of human sacrifice in terms of time. Offering a human life before its natural demise may have been an appeal to the gods to disperse the future time of one individual among the many, for the benefit of the greater good. The sacrificial act served a dual purpose: on the one hand, it satiated the desires of the gods—but more importantly, it reinforced the mechanisms of societal control that allowed Mayan priests to continue exercising their reign.

In twenty-first century terms, the unwilling sacrifice of thousands of U.S. citizens with the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers on September 11, 2001 was also an exercise in control. The extreme violence of this act instilled an unprecedented fear in the general populace, the ultimate expression of Burroughs' argument that “Time has no meaning without death. Death uses time” (APIHOT, 16).

Question: For what?

Answer: “...For Control to control” (OWF, 125)—not through the imposition of order, but conversely through inciting chaos as a means of maintaining terror and bewilderment in the collective psyche of populations worldwide: to buy time.

Burroughs recognized a “*quality* of consideration...A meditation upon two models of time that resulted in a view seemingly existing outside of either” (OWF, 126) in the comparison of two dominant civilizations in human history, namely the Mayan and U.S. empires.

Mc Neill recognized a similar quality through juxtaposing two disparate personae in time: namely, Frederick Catherwood and himself.

Mc Neill recounts the early career of Catherwood, and then discusses the role of *drawing out* information through the act of drawing, through the writing process, and through experience. He recounts an extraordinary moment where, eighteen years after Mc Neill discussed with Burroughs visions he'd had as a child of an angry boy at the dinner table, his mother phoned him. She explained that his father had been previously married, and that his father's first wife had borne a son, about whom Mc Neill had never had any knowledge. Mc Neill knew even before his mother finished her explanation what she was about to tell him.

Catherwood lived during a period in history where the threat of insurrection led the British monarchy to increase surveillance in the interests of maintaining state control and security. With the advent of the industrial revolution, women and children were hired as cheap labour, similar to the outsourcing of labour to “third world” and “developing” countries that happens today.

An increased war on crime and harsh techniques of imprisonment instituted by the government were widely introduced. The Methodists anticipated that the end of the world would arrive in 1836, and telecommunications

exploded with the advent of the telegraph. Does any of this sound familiar? *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*¹⁰.

Dramatic association lines are drawn between the number 23 and its frequent presence in Mc Neill's travels, concluding with his discovering a series of "newspaper clippings and odds and ends" (OWF, 144) in Box 23 of the Burroughs archive at Ohio State University. The artefacts found within this collection were a reminder of Burroughs' concentrated interest in occult phenomena, and were a validation to Mc Neill that he was "on the right track."

Burroughs is attributed with having been the first person to recognize the "23 phenomenon," which suggests that at least some events are directly connected in some way with the number 23. As reported by Robert Anton Wilson in *Fortean Times*, Burroughs encountered a sailor named Captain Clark who boasted he'd sailed for 23 years without an accident. That day, Clark went sailing and died with all his passengers. Later the same day, Burroughs heard a radio announcement reporting that an airliner in Florida—Flight 23—also navigated by a Captain Clark, had crashed.

Through a friend, Mc Neill was led to encounter a psychic in the spiritualist community of Lily Dale, New York. Seemingly relevant information relayed through the medium with whom he was working suggested that a "mutual field of resonance"¹¹ was being shared between the medium and Mc Neill. In a later consultation with another medium on the west coast, a similar shared association between the medium and Mc Neill apparently transpired. These events led to Mc Neill's studying the practice of "...another kind of attentiveness" in greater detail, leading to the realization of "...remarkable insight" (OWF, 149).

Further to this subject, Mc Neill explained in a personal email correspondence,

...It was a unique form of attentiveness that I found really fascinating since it opened a whole new sense of "Here"—specifically in the context of Death/Ah Pook. I went to Lily Dale simply because I was visiting my friend's family nearby and she had suggested it...I attach no conventional "otherworldly" significance to the information conveyed by the mediums nor to the coincidences with Catherwood.

Catherwood's presumed death in 1854 was as a victim of drowning from the sinking of the steamship the *Arctic*. As it travelled across the Atlantic Ocean, the ship collided with another in thick fog off the coast of Newfoundland. 282 passengers were aboard. Most of the women and children on the ship died; the *Arctic's* crew took the lifeboats and left everyone else to perish. Mc Neill would discover later through independent research that there were only 23 reported survivors¹². Two months later, one empty lifeboat was discovered that had not been previously accounted for: "It was discovered by the schooner *Lily Dale*" (OWF, 147).

Mc Neill recounts how while waiting in an airport, he read *Last Words* by Burroughs for the first time. The last passage in Burroughs' journal before his death made reference to the book *Her Name, Titanic* by Charles Pellegrino. Burroughs references page 18 from the book, which Mc Neill later discovers is a discussion of "telepresence." Driven to find out more, Mc Neill reads a second book by Pellegrino on the subject, called *Titanic*. In this volume, he discovers, "Among those traveling aboard the Titanic were: a Mr. Burroughs, a Mr. John Hart, and yes—a Mr. Pook. All three of them drowned" (OWF, 153).

Where does time begin? When does it end? If we abandon the simple reference points of here and there, what are we left with? Time is now. Now where? Now here. Nowhere. Time extends to infinity, not just from the past into the future, but in every direction. It is available to us always, if we are prepared to receive it.

At this point, we have strayed far from the original trajectory having anything to do with comics. It is nonetheless important to ruminate on this aspect of Mc Neill's story, if only to do justice to the entirety of his tale. Were it not for Gary Groth (co-founder of Fantagraphics Books) viewing Mc Neill's artwork at the [Track 16 Gallery](#) in Los Angeles in 2009, it is possible that neither *Observed While Falling* nor *The Lost Art of Ah Pook is Here* would ever have been published. For Mc Neill, the resurrection of the artwork he created for *Ah Pook is Here* has everything to do with pursuing the Catherwood trail.

¹⁰ *The more things change, the more they stay the same.*
—Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr (1808-1890)

¹¹ Personal email correspondence with Malcolm Mc Neill.

¹² Personal email correspondence with Malcolm Mc Neill.

The tension residing at the heart of Mc Neill's quest is quintessentially existential. What attracted me initially to *Observed While Falling* was Mc Neill's commitment to exploring questions whose answers are "as impossible to explain as [they] are to dispute" (OWF, 146) without arriving at definitive conclusions. How did following this elusive trail change me? It brought me back. To where? That is precisely the question. That is exactly the point.

Observed While Falling is far more than a book about William Burroughs and *Ah Pook is Here* was a whole lot more than a comic book. The Ah Pook experience encapsulates a state of mind in which the full reservoir of time can be accessed at any moment. Ah Pook as the god of Death and regeneration was the vehicle for an exploration of that hypothesis. He escaped from the pages of his own book to take renewed form in a story about his story, thus perpetuating the cycle of death and rebirth throughout this life.