With the same analytical facility that led his grandfather to build the world’s first effective adding machine, William Seward Burroughs is intent on shaping what he believes will be the greatest step forward in human thought for centuries. His philosophies have their foundation in his legendary novel of drugs, violence and homosexuality, The Naked Lunch — which despite its violent sensationalism was a serious study of how one man can exert control over another. Burroughs, now 57, is convinced that mankind’s cerebral future lies in electronic manipulation of the brain — a science still in its infancy, but with limitless (and frightening) potential. His latest ideas, though a natural extension of his former work, show that Burroughs is ideologically a moving target. Past attempts by the beats and the hippies to embrace him as the mysterious Father of the Underground have failed simply because Burroughs belongs to no-one: he considers himself a citizen of the whole world, if not the universe. His novels talk with bland familiarity about entire planets and endless galaxies. Born in 1914 in St. Louis, Missouri, Burroughs graduated at Harvard in English literature, then spent two post-graduate years studying anthropology. Later he worked as a reporter, copywriter, exterminator, bartender and private detective. He lived in Mexico, travelled in South America, then moved to Tangier and eventually to London. Burroughs was married in 1945, and has one son, William Jnr., who has recently written a book about narcotics himself — Speed. His wife died in an accident in 1951.

For almost 10 years Burroughs was addicted to hard drugs, a purgatorial experience vividly recreated in Naked Lunch. It was only when faced with the prospect of terminal addiction that he flew to London for several ultimately effective cures with apomorphine. He did not start to write until he was 35, when he published a semi-autobiographical book called Junkie under the name of William Lee. Naked Lunch followed (the title was suggested by Allen Ginsberg) and Burroughs was immediately acclaimed as an ally of the Beats. Norman Mailer called him “the only living American novelist conceivably possessed of genius.” But Burroughs’ relentless concepts of life, unfolding in his later novels The Soft Machine, The Ticket that Exploded and Nova Express, gradually alienated him from the peace-and-love brigade. “Love”, he has said, “is a con.” He recently wrote a film script based on the last words of the American mobster Dutch Schultz, and is currently working on a film interpretation of Naked Lunch. He would like to make a film about the pre-Civil War days in the Deep South — “All those darkies singing sweet and low is so much Hollywood horseshit.” In this exclusive Penthouse interview, conducted in Burroughs’ London apartment by Graham Masterton and Andrew Rossabi, he discusses the mental engineering which can make or break mankind.

Penthouse: It’s nearly 10 years since you gave a satirical but graphic description of totalitarian control in The Naked Lunch. Do you think your visions of a decade ago are any nearer reality?

Burroughs: The Naked Lunch was a science-fiction idea but is now absolute fact, mainly because of the development of electrodes which can control the brain. If anyone has these electrodes planted in him — and there may be many ways to do this, not necessitating an actual surgical operation — he can be made to think, feel, or even experience, anything that the manipulator of the electrodes wants. He can be made to make involuntary movements: to pick something up against his will. Also to feel fear, or sexuality, or any other emotion.

Where such control is possible, the question arises of who is to exercise it. Once someone has the control box he is in complete control of anyone fitted with electrodes.

Penthouse: But a would-be dictator would need to overcome the practical problem of implanting such electrodes.

Burroughs: One can imagine all sorts of scandalous ways of doing it. “Doctor had 100 Love Slaves” . . . he would lure young girls in for minor operations, plant electrodes in their brains and that would be it. Or an equivalent to electrodes could be produced possibly by a virus, by microwaves or by an electro-magnetic field. We also know that certain chemicals stimulate particular brain areas, such as apomorphine which stimulates the back brain, the hypothalamus. These brain areas haven’t been carefully plotted but of course they can be on an encephalographic machine.

Penthouse: How much are we herded already, without electrical means?

Burroughs: There is always psychological influence, there’s nothing new about that. All governments, all religions have used it throughout history. The point is that now the means of control are much more efficient. We have computers. We have populations exposed to exactly the same images and words, millions of people every day. So the opportunities for control are much more potent now than they have ever been. The same development started with the industrial revolution, the same thing has happened with weapons — they’ve
become more and more efficient, which of course has brought a whole new, almost a biological mutation, into revolutionary tactics. Anyone can go down into his basement and make a spear or a club — but they can’t make automatic weapons, they can’t make tanks, they can’t make dive bombers. So while the methods of psychological control are much more effective, so are the methods of physical control. Since the people in control hold heavy weapons, 1% could keep down 99% if it came to that. This was all implicit in the industrial revolution: first, that we’d have larger and larger populations, which means more and more control. Just take the job of feeding all these people in London — think of the technical job of doing that and the number of people involved in it. When Jerry Rubin and people like that talk about dropping out and doing their thing — my God, how many people could live on what England could produce? As you have larger and larger populations, more and more elaborate apparatus is needed to give them even the necessities. The bigger the thing gets, the more control you need just to run it, just to keep it moving, just to keep it from foundering completely. The nature of control is also hierarchical. You can’t really get anything done unless someone does it, unless someone gives the orders. So I don’t think it’s too far-fetched to say that the orders now are given by fewer and fewer people.

**Penthouse:** So society would be even more hierarchical if electrode control were to reach a high degree of refinement?

**Burroughs:** Who’s going to use it, and how, is an absolutely open question. I cannot think of any existing society in whose hands I would like this power to fall. Suppose the people in the Pentagon could condition people to believe in what they believed in — or what they pretend to believe in, at least — and turn everyone into decent Americans. That would be horrible. This control would be more than just a case of pressing this button here and this button there, this could be a whole computer programme. Scientists have already wired an ape’s brain to a computer. Now the ape’s brain can give orders to the computer, and initiate action in the computer; then the computer can chew on this over and shoot it back. In other words it’s a feed-back between the computer and the brain. The computer can be programmed to erase past conditioning — this has been done with apes — or to accentuate any particular aspect of conditioning. You would have a computer programme that would determine a person’s entire actions and feelings, and the person would be physiologically incapable of doing anything about it. But the fact that this knowledge is all out in the open is encouraging, because these developments need not be used for control at all.

**Penthouse:** Are there other potentialities in electrode control?

**Burroughs:** Yes, you could attach yourself to a computer and have all its advantages: it would figure out, for example, everything you owe, accounts receivable, bar, barn, barn, and give you an answer. Say two businessmen are doing a deal; one would tune into his computer and say: “No, it’s no deal unless you up 55 per cent. I’ve just been through the whole thing with my little computer here.”

**Penthouse:** Wouldn’t such facilities make us too reliant on automation? Surely there are still many capabilities within the human mind itself to be explored and developed?

**Burroughs:** Yes, but the way to explore them is to assume control of them. People can now do in a few hours what a yogi took 20 years to learn, that is to control their brainwaves, and learn to implement them at will. This facility of course would offer you protection from mental intrusion — you would know immediately whether any tampering was going on — so automation need not necessarily lead to a control situation. There are several centers for autonomic shaping, as it’s called — Joe Kiami in San Francisco and about three or four others. It seems to me that this is one of the most important developments in recent years. You see, you can cut your learning time for anything immeasurably by a feedback with autonomic shaping. You might be able to learn to become 12 dan in judo in just a few hours instead of 40 years. The use of this knowledge for learning processes hasn’t even been gone into yet.

**Penthouse:** Autonomic shaping sounds a good deal more accurate in its effect than hallucinogens.

**Burroughs:** I’ve frequently noted a regrettable vagueness in most accounts of hallucinogenic drugs. People feel they are part of everything, all that sort of thing, vague pantheistic feelings. Huxley said a lot of it in *The Doors of Perception*, that hallucinogenic drugs simply make you more aware, on all levels. But over a period of time I think they can lead to another area of non-awareness, to a sort of hermetic, dreamland state which is not what they are there for, as Huxley expresses it in *The Doors of Perception*.

**Penthouse:** So does the use of autonomic shaping supersede hallucinogenic drugs?

**Burroughs:** Not only that, it supersedes any form of psychotherapy — any form of psychiatry at all. We can find the actual brainwave of any obsession and locate it accurately, so there’s no need to fool around with any kind of verbal investigation. Autonomic shaping can teach people how to control and produce at will different brainwaves which correspond to different emotional states. They can also teach them to control digestion, blood pressure, rate of heart beat. These things are of course symptoms of anxiety. Remove all the physical symptoms, and anxiety cannot persist in the absence of all its physical manifestations, muscular tension, and so on.

**Penthouse:** Is this the beginning of genuine telepathy?

**Burroughs:** Immediately. Immediately, because two people could stimulate the same brain areas, and be in instant communication. But remember that mental communication of a sort is in operation all the time. I don’t know if you’ve ever watched two horse-dealers. It happened to be present at one of these transactions. You could just see the figure in someone’s mind. I would say, well, I know now what figure he’s going to quote and what figure he will accept. That was the whole point of all this feeling over the horse and chat back and forth, to find those things out. And of course all gamblers pride themselves on their intuitive faculties and also on being able to shut out other people’s mental feelers. That’s the poker face of course, the block. So I think this basic communication is accomplished fact and a part of everyday life. Another thing: I think your ability to read other people’s thoughts is dependent on your ability to suspend your own, to suspend any preoccupations you might have. In other words, it’s simply a matter of giving your full attention. This ties in with hallucinogenic drugs. I think that insofar as they help people to keep their eyes open or open their eyes, they’re valuable. But if people made a habit of keeping their eyes open at all times, then many of the phenomena of hallucinogenic drugs would be produced simply by extending their own awareness, simply by seeing what is going on when they walk down the street. The reason why most people do not see what is there when they’re walking down the street is that they’ve just got a sound-track turned on, so they’re walking along in their own haze of word images.

**Penthouse:** You’ve studied Egyptian hieroglyphs and pictorial forms of communication. Would these be the language of telepathy instead of normal words?

**Burroughs:** Yes, though Joe Kiami is talking about developing a whole new language which would not only be a pictorial but a symbol language. This has been in existence for a long while in mathematical physics, sciences and computers, but would now be developed as the language of telepathy.

**Penthouse:** This is obviously going to bring people into much closer mental contact than at any time in history. Will this lead to any kind of cultural shock?

**Burroughs:** There’s a book by an anthropologist called Carlos Castaneda, and it become a sort of underground hippie classic. Anyone, it tells how an old medicine man has some far-out hallucinogenic drugs. One was powerful, and removed all covers, and a young man took it and was terrified and he asked the medicine man: “What did I look like?” The medicine man said: “I didn’t look at you.” He said: “No two people can take the little smoke and look at each other and live.”
With electrical help, you might become a 12 dan in judo
in just a few hours, instead of years

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saying there is that no two people can really look at each other and live, and remain people. We can of course biologically defend ourselves against something which we cannot assimilate. But when they'd taken a drug, as in this case, there's no way in which they could defend themselves against the knowledge of what they were and what they represented: they can't look at each other and they can't look in a mirror.

Penthouse: Won't this effect hamper the progress of mental training?

Burroughs: I don't think so. Allegedly what everyone wants is to be closer to other people. If people sometimes seem to want to get further and further apart, it's because contact is unpleasant. It's not a question of contact going too far; perhaps it doesn't go far enough, and perhaps it goes in all the wrong directions.

Penthouse: Could autonomic shaping be used to cure drug addiction?

Burroughs: It could certainly be used to implement any cure, we don't know to what extent. For example, withdrawal symptoms are undoubtedly accompanied by certain brainwaves. To what extent these brainwaves could be tuned out and relieved by autonomic shaping or by direct electric brain stimulation, we don't yet know. Sleep can be induced by passing a light electric current through the brain in what the Russian scientists who are working on it call "electrosleep". This is not as precise as either electric brain stimulation or autonomic shaping because the sleep centres are not being directly stimulated. I would say that electric brain stimulation would be much more the answer to drug addiction, though you might be able to isolate some alpha waves and get the addict to control them, but by and large when someone is in that disturbed a state it's not a time for teaching him something.

Penthouse: Do you think that governments are making serious enough attempts to end addiction?

Burroughs: Certainly not in America. It's too big an industry. It's beneficial to the government because it greatly increases their range of control. That is, if they can make millions of people criminals by Act of Congress than they are brought under police surveillance. You've heard about this theft of FBI files; well only about 1% of those files had to do with serious crime.

Penthouse: On that basis you would expect official resistance to an effective electrical method of curing addiction?

Burroughs: When something like that gets going it isn't too easy to stop it. The time to stop it would have been before they obtained money for their research and published their results. And of course we don't yet know whether electrical stimulation is the answer.

Penthouse: What is the best available cure you know for drug addiction?

Burroughs: Apomorphine. But, you see, apomorphine causes certain brainwaves, and these can be isolated. The brainwaves of any drug could be isolated, and presumably you could simulate the effects of any drug electrically. You could do this particularly with apomorphine since it has distinctive brainwaves because it stimulates the back brain. The effects of barbiturates could be most easily simulated: they are only sedatives working on the front brain.

Penthouse: Does this mean we could end pain electrically?

Burroughs: Yes. Theoretically, all a drug does is make certain changes, and those changes are electrical and they are chemical as well. Any electrical change has its chemical and metabolic correlants.

Penthouse: Are the means for autonomic shaping within the grasp of ordinary people?

Burroughs: The equipment is not all that expensive, depending on how elaborate it is, but you could set up a pretty good unit for about £12,000. There are also little machines that just isolate alpha waves, called Alphaphones - they're selling for $175 in the States and hippies are buying them. But you have to remember there are innumerable brainwaves, and the difficulty is in finding them, isolating them and learning to control them. This is the means, though, of making the first detailed map of the brain.

Penthouse: There are obviously large areas of the brain which are not used or have no apparent function. Will autonomic shaping allow us to develop them?

Burroughs: According to the methods we have now, we can only reproduce brainwaves that are actually being emitted, and if the area was totally disused you might not have access to it. If it were occasionally used, then you would. But undoubtedly learning to recognize brainwaves and emit those you have would bring others into range. That is, if you learn what is on top of this disused area, probably more and more that area would come into use.

Penthouse: Do you believe that at any time in our history man was capable of using most of his brain?

Burroughs: There is no evidence in what we call written history, but remember that what we call history only dates back 7-8,000 years. The human species, according to anthropological evidence, was in existence in its present form from between 500,000 and a million years, so what in hell were they doing the rest of the time? It would be unwise to assume that they had no artifacts, or made artifacts of a different substance. We know about the Ice Age, and the fact that there was much more plentiful vegetation and that people might have been entirely vegetarian - in fact the appendix is a residual organ of an entirely vegetarian period. A completely vegetarian society might not have had artifacts, or they might have been made totally of wood, or been destroyed in the Ice Age.

Penthouse: Do you give any credence to the Chariots of the Gods theories that man's mental development was helped along in pre-history by visitors from other planets?

Burroughs: I've never seen a flying saucer. I think people's lives are very grey, and they like to imagine things like this. Also there's the dangerous myth of the "wise saviour who comes from without." That was the myth that undermined the Incas in the face of the Spaniards, the Great White Gods. They thought these people had come to do them some great favour, but they hadn't come to do any favours. They'd just come to do them. Should anyone arrive from outer space under such auspices, I think we would do well to be on our guard as the Incas would have done to be on their guard when the Great White Gods started cutting off their hands to find out where the gold was.

Penthouse: Do you consider that our own space travel has helped our mental progress?

Burroughs: I think it was worth any amount of money that might have been spent to leave the earth and realize that there is another context, that we can actually leave the context of this planet. Of course, in its present form, the thing is not a great adventure offered to your everyday person, but so few people can participate and it's so terribly expensive. It isn't like, say, the great days when they started discovering America, when anyone could get together and outfit a ship and try his luck. This is way beyond even the largest private fortune.

Penthouse: What effects do you think space travel will have on astronauts? Will they become completely dissociated from earth, both physically and mentally?

Burroughs: No conditioning can maintain its force in the total absence of the stimuli that produce it. There is no doubt that leaving the earth for any period will give you an entirely different viewpoint simply because the whole context that was keeping your present viewpoint in operation would no longer be working on you.

Penthouse: Not many of the present astronauts seem to have noted this effect.

Burroughs: That's because they send up people with very limited perceptions. I think...
it's deliberate. They don't want anybody to get up there who would really be aware of what was happening. They pick very normal, very conventional human beings indeed – both the Russians and the Americans. But they've still let out some rather strange things at one time or another. One of them had the feeling that while he was flying on his missions, he remembered having dreamed before the mission of being on a ship floating in the air. And when he thought of it, he realized that the ship in space was the one he had seen in his dream. It's possible there is an element of truth to these claims.

Penthouse: Is it conceivable that autonamics could train our minds enough for us to levitate spaceships by the power of thought alone?

Burroughs: I think it is a fundamental confusion to think of mental force as exerting any influence or pressure on matter seen and conceived as matter. If I saw this cup in front of me as no more real than what goes on in my mind, then I could move it, or at least I could move the image of it, but I would not be moving the matter of it. That's the contradiction. Science is always being hampered by idealized concepts like this.

Penthouse: How quickly do you expect electrode control to be in general use? Or might it be held up by such old-fashioned concepts of scientific development?

Burroughs: It will be held up by the Christian attitude to sex.

Penthouse: Why?

Burroughs: Because this attitude prevents investigation. It shuts out any really objective study on the subject. Wilhelm Reich started studies with electrodes attached to the penis, and found that actual electrical impulses were given off and that these could be graphed, and that a pleasurable orgasm would show a different graph from an unpleasurable one. His experiments were totally disregarded and he was persecuted on account of them. A statistical approach like Kinsey's simply tells us the incidence: it doesn't tell us anything about the phenomena. But we are now in a position to investigate everyone's sex life through the study of brainwaves and autonomic shaping. There is no reason why everyone's sex life shouldn't be completely satisfactory – as satisfactory as they potentially can make it.

Penthouse: Do you foresee that the whole process of sexual intercourse could change in methodology?

Burroughs: It may well be. We don't know what sex is, so the process it represents may be doing something that you don't think it's doing at all. We'll find out.

Penthouse: How could electrodes improve sex?

Burroughs: Well, socially, first of all. Here's one person over here and another person over here, and they want something sexually but they can't get together and society will see that they don't. That's why the law persecuted magazines carrying advertisements for sex partners. But advertisements are a crude method; the whole process could be done on a computer. People could be brought together on terms of having reciprocal brainwaves. Everyone could be provided through the computer with someone else who was completely sexually compatible. But it's more important than this. If the human species is going to mutate in any way, then the mutations must come through sex – how else could they? And sooner or later a species must mutate or it dies out.

Penthouse: What would be the most desirable mutation that autonomic shaping could bring about?

Burroughs: Simply removing any past conditioning that has a subconscious effect on our behaviour would tremendously increase human efficiency. I don't mean that people would be emotionless, but they would not experience emotions which they felt to be alien to them. They would be able to identify and control the sources of their emotions.

Penthouse: So you think the principal mutation will be in the brain rather than in the body?

Burroughs: A mutation in the brain could rapidly bring about a mutation in the body. It is my theory that evolutionary changes do not take place gradually over a period of years or millions of years by natural selection. They take place quite suddenly in a few generations. Darwin came in with these theories and postulated long periods of time in which changes could occur. But geographical features like the Himalayas do not arise gradually; they occur very suddenly indeed. There have been mammoths found frozen with their food undigested in their stomachs. They were frozen solid in a matter of seconds.

Penthouse: How much change can we withstand within our present social system?

Burroughs: It seems to me that once a formula on this planet gets started, gets firmly established, it's very hard to change or replace it. And the more mechanized and over-populated the world is, the more difficult it becomes. Overpopulation is the problem which makes all the other problems insoluble. There just isn't enough to go round. There is no solution except to cut down the population. You can expand productive capacity, you can accommodate more people in South America – that's the only underpopulated country. But what then? There's the idea of moving into the sea. But according to Cousteau, the sea is already 40% destroyed by pollution. The more people you have, the more pollution you have and the fewer resources as a result. That really is an impossible situation unless they get together on a world-wide population control. What is the purpose of all these millions and millions of people? England could comfortably support about 20 million and they've got 50 million. Another absolute. another cul-de-sac that the whole world is in, that the creaky social systems would not support any basic discovery. So instead of discoveries being immediately exploited they're covering them up. Did you read The Biological Time Bomb? Well, that's his great point. He says these things aren't 300 years from now – they're 10, 15, and 20 years. Genetic control, prolonging life – whose life is going to be prolonged? We've got so many people now that we really have to stack them up like cordwood, if they all live to be 135. But what government could decide? In other words, the social system which dates back, my God, to the 18th century at least, could not support discoveries that are here or will be here in a few years.

Penthouse: We're being deprived, then, of useful and labour-saving inventions?

Burroughs: Oh, my God, yes. I was brought up to believe in the tradition that the good product would always find a market. But it's not in industry's interest to put out a pair of socks that won't wear out. The original nylon socks would not wear out. I wore one pair through South America, walking through jungles and water. Now they wear out in a week just like any other socks. It's not to manufacturers' advantage to produce good products. It's not to their advantage to produce houses that won't wear out or anything else that won't wear out. Industry and government don't want these products because they would disrupt a very creaky social system. In other words, scientists are producing new inventions much quicker than the social system can possibly absorb them without great disruption.

Penthouse: Do you feel then that our present society has outlived itself?

Burroughs: What we see is a whole series of practically insoluble problems and the simple fact is that there isn't a single politician who can get up and say the whole thing is basically wrong. They can't say that it won't work. We see world-wide inflation which could jump suddenly geometrically and have millions of people out in the street overnight. Pollution, radiation – we don't know how far that's going, they're all lying about it, and of course there is a war which seems to be getting worse. Animals usually die out because the conditions that make their life possible cease to exist – a change of climate and whatever kind of food they have disappears. Control of our minds, our society and our environment may be the answer. I think the human species has reached a point where it's going to have to take some form of forward step or we're just not going to make it.

Penthouse: Mr Burroughs, thank you.