William Burroughs
The Limits of Control

There is growing interest in new techniques of mind-control. It has been suggested that Sirhan Sirhan was the subject of post-hypnotic suggestion as he sat shaking violently on the steam table in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles while an as-yet unidentified woman held him and whispered in his ear. It has been alleged that behavior modification techniques are used on troublesome prisoners and inmates, often without their consent. Dr. Delgado, who stopped a charging bull by remote control of electrodes in the bull’s brain, has left the U.S. recently to pursue his studies on human subjects in Spain. Brainwashing, psychotropic drugs, lobotomy and other more subtle forms of psychosurgery; the technocratic control apparatus of the United States has at its fingertips new techniques which it fully exploited could make Orwell’s 1984 seem like a benevolent utopia. But words are still the principal instruments of control. Suggestions are words. Persuasion are words. Orders are words. No control machine so far devised can operate without words, and any control machine which attempts to do so relying entirely on external force or entirely on physical control of the mind will soon encounter the limits of control.

A basic impasse of all control machines is this: Control needs time in which to exercise control. Because control also needs opposition or acquiescence; otherwise it ceases to be control. I control a hypnotized subject (at least partially); I control a slave, a dog, a worker; but if I establish complete control somehow, as by implanting electrodes in the brain, then my subject is little more than a tape recorder, a camera, a robot. You don’t control a tape recorder—you use it. Consider the distinction, and the impasse implicit here. All control systems try to make control as tight as possible, but at the same time, if they succeed completely, there would be nothing left to control. Suppose for example a control system installed electrodes in the brains of all prospective workers at birth. Control is now complete. Even the thought of rebellion is neurologically impossible. No police force is necessary. No psychological control is necessary, other than pressing buttons to achieve certain activations and operations. The controllers could turn on the machine, and the workers would carry out their tasks, at least they might think so. However, they have ceased to control the workers, since the workers have become machine-like tape recorders.

When there is no more opposition, control becomes a meaningless proposition. It is highly questionable whether a human organism could survive complete control. There would be nothing there. No persons there. Life is will, motivation and the workers would no longer be alive, perhaps literally. The concept of suggestion as a control technique presupposes that control is partial and not complete. You do not have to give suggestions to your tape-recorder, nor subject it to pain, coercion or persuasion.

The Mayan control system, where the priests kept the all-important Books of seasons and gods, the Calendar, was predicated on the illiteracy of the workers. Modern control systems are predicated on universal literacy since they operate through the mass media—a very two-edged control instrument, as Watergate has shown. Control systems are vulnerable, and the news media are by their nature uncontrollable, at least in Western society. The alternative press is news, and alternative society is news, and as such both are taken up by the mass media. The monopoly that Hearst and Luce once exercised is breaking down. In fact, the more completely hermetic and seemingly successful a control system is, the more vulnerable it becomes. A weakness inherent in the Mayan system was that they didn’t need an army to control their workers, and therefore did not have an army when they did need one to repel invaders. It is a rule of social structures that anything that is not needed will atrophy and become inoperative over a period of time. Cut off from the war game—and remember, the Mayans had no neighbors to quarrel with—they lose the ability to fight. In the Mayan Caper I suggested that such a hermetic control system could be completely disoriented and shattered by even one person who tampered with the control calendar on which the control system depended more and more heavily as the actual means of force withered away.

Consider a control situation: ten people in a lifeboat. Two armed self-appointed leaders force the other eight to do the rowing while they dispose of the food and water, keeping most of it for themselves and doling out only enough to keep the other eight rowing. The two leaders now need to exercise control to
IN PSYCHIATRIC EMERGENCIES

HALDOL (droperidol) injection

Highly effective control of acute psychoses

10 ml vial: 50 mg/mL

[Image: Injection vial with dropper]

CONTRAINDICATIONS: Hypersensitivity to HaldoL, pregnancy, breastfeeding.

SIDE EFFECTS: Tardive dyskinesia, neuroleptic malignant syndrome, akathisia, extrapyramidal symptoms, sedation, dizziness, constipation, dry mouth.

PROCAINAMIDE injection

Acute and chronic treatment of arrhythmias, prophylaxis against migraine.

100 mg/mL in 2 ml vials

[Image: Injection vial]

CONTRAINDICATIONS: Hypersensitivity to procainamide, severe liver disease, severe hypokalemia, severe hypomagnesemia.

SIDE EFFECTS: Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, dizziness, hypotension, allergic reactions.

[Text continues on the next page]
There can be no doubt that a cultural revolution of unprecedented dimensions has taken place in America during the last thirty years, and since America is now the model for the rest of the western world, this revolution is worldwide. Another factor is the mass media, which spreads any cultural movement in all directions. The fact that this worldwide revolution has taken place indicates that the controllers have been forced to make concessions. Of course, a concession is still the retention of control. Here's a dime, I keep a dollar. Ease up on censorship, but remember we could take it all back. Well, at this point that is questionable.

Concession is another control bind. History shows that once a government starts to make concessions it is a one-way street. They could of course take all the concessions back, but that would expose them to the double jeopardy of revolution and the much greater danger of overt fascism. This is highly dangerous to the present controllers. Does any clear policy arise from this welter of confusion? The answer is probably no. The mass media has proven a very unreliable and even treacherous instrument of control. It is uncontrollable owing to its basic need for NEWS. If one paper or even a string of papers owned by the same person tries to kill a story, that makes that story hotter as NEWS. Some paper will pick it up. To impose government censorship on the media is a step in the direction of State control, a step which big money is most reluctant to take.

I don't mean to suggest that control automatically defeats itself, nor that protest is therefore unnecessary. A government is never more dangerous than when embarking on a self-defeating or downright suicidal course. It is encouraging that some behavior modification projects have been exposed and halted, and certainly such exposure and publicity should continue. In fact, I submit that we have a right to insist that all scientific research be subject to public scrutiny, and that there should be no such thing as "top-secret" research.