

ANALYSIS

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test (1968)



Tom Wolfe

(1931-)

“For Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters, the subjects of Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), the medium was...a painted bus, a drug trip, a canvas dripping in Day-Glo. Wolfe conceived of a film as his form for the journey the Pranksters took; and their ‘trip’ was...quintessentially 1960s... The Pranksters became theater in order to attain what they felt was authenticity.... We can see the entire structure of *Electric Kool-Aid* as film within film: the Merry Pranksters exploiting their lives for a film which will be the film of the sixties; and Wolfe exploiting the Pranksters for *his* version. What is of primary concern is the desire to preserve every act, gesture, scenic effect, sound. The bus on which the Pranksters travel the country is an engineer’s delight. It is ‘on the road’ with features of Kon-Tiki: every move chronicled and charted, as if it were entering unknown waters and had to prepare the way for the next explorer.

Not unusually, the driver of the bus is Neal Cassady, whose manic exploits Kerouac used in *On the Road* as Dean Moriarty’s and who would stand in for Ray Hicks in Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers*. Stone himself moves on the margins of Kesey’s group. What Kerouac pioneered in the 1950s, and what the Pranksters manifest in their 1964 cross-country trek, was the desire to capture the Now. ‘Now’ became so important because it cut through all the social and political detritus of the postwar era. It enabled the individual to become his own god [tradition of Emerson], and it enabled the idea of all the various forms of ‘salvation’ and ‘sensationalism’ emerging from the fifties: the drug culture...What Kesey, a well-established novelist by the time of the trip, hoped to accomplish was the ultimate journey, in its way the earth equivalent of the moon shot at the end of the decade.

It is important to view the Merry Pranksters and their Day-Glo, psychedelic, hallucinatory bus trip as part of the same environment that led to the moon shot in 1969. Wolfe cannot make this point, of course, in 1968. But the novelistic dimension is here, to contrast Pranksters and astronauts. Wolfe demonstrates that many of the same clean-cut, athletic, all-American types who went into the astronaut program were drawn to Kesey’s exploration. Kesey himself, Babbs, Hagen, Walker, even Cassady, are muscular, prototypical

Americans who inspire confidence. Yet they are dropouts, even Kesey, who no longer believed in fiction after having published *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*....

The Merry Pranksters were...appealing to young men—a novelist, a cameraman, a soundman—who wanted Now instead of Future. Explorers, they put their minds and bodies on the line. They, too, had the 'right stuff.' A good trip under acid *was* an adventure... Yet what characterized the acid trip was not only its Nowness, but is anti-establishmentarianism. The astronauts used their considerable talents and courage to express the national will; there was little question they were our new missionaries and conquerors. Their Adversaries were not African natives or strange tribes, but the scientific unknown. For the Merry Pranksters—also white, Christian, mainly men, a few harem women—it was not the national will, but the personal will. One motif that ran through their trip was that each could explore himself as he wished, as long as he didn't miss the bus. A bad trip on acid was supported by the rest; only one person was asked not to return. The national will was the enemy; Now was in.

While astronauts represented the external, successful...country, the Pranksters represented where the country's soul was going, into internal trips, into Now and Me and I Am. We see this vividly in Kesey's conception of nature. For the astronauts, it was transcendental, Emerson's nature on an even greater scale; and the moon shot was a transcendental experience, religious, awesome, bringing one closer to God in every respect. For Kesey at La Honda, nature was simply a backdrop, a place where he could locate his sound equipment...'the Nest'... Day-Glo is preferable to nature's colors; sound equipment to birds; amplification to actual noises. Artificial has preempted natural.

Wolfe's effort here differs from fictional treatment in that he never penetrates into Kesey, nor does he really attempt to. Kesey is the novelist, the organizer, the athletic, bull-like, charismatic figure whose inner toughness impresses even the Hell's Angels. Yet we never begin to discover what he is, what made him throw over his fiction, what drove him into Prankster exploits when he is obviously more sensitive and intelligent than the others. He is grouped with Cassady, and yet he and Cassady are worlds apart—simply by virtue of Kesey's ability to write two well-received novels.

The same is true of Wolfe's other characters, the other Pranksters. He presents an external view of 'Mountain Girl,' a young lady of considerable distinction who travels with the Pranksters and becomes Kesey's girl; but interesting as she is, Wolfe rarely gets closer to her. Fictional methods are eschewed; Wolfe revels in journalism. He explains in his Author's Note at the end that he tried 'not only to tell what the Pranksters did but to re-create the mental atmosphere or subjective reality of it.' This he attempts by way of a hyperbolic prose and an 'acid test' obliqueness. He strikes from off center in superb clusters of prose. The 'mental atmosphere,' however, is not there, the very dimension fiction provides.

The Now experience may lend itself only to inventive journalism, since it has little of the resonance and texture fiction needs. The Merry Pranksters, in this view, are what they are: a phenomenon with no further dimension, a happening. Wolfe becomes a Prankster for the sake of his 'film,' but is unaltered by the experience. One of the essential ingredients of the new journalism is that the author offers himself as an equivalent of the subject, or takes on a vicarious persona... This is the new journalism written by those who stand outside: comfortable, bourgeois, relatively untouched by their subject. There is also the new journalism by those who are within the subject... But whether the experience is vicarious or lived, it reaches us by means of explanation, or exposition, not by way of imaginative or creative development.

Kesey and the Pranksters lent themselves to journalistic retelling when Wolfe found a language that would provide some equivalent in journalism for what development and creativity would mean in fiction. He used language as a way of creating what the novelist presents in terms of perspective, image, compression, and condensation.... The Kesey phenomenon, finally, is not a film, although the film could have been a great piece of Americana. Even the Acid Tests—those large outdoor events, with acid replacing baseball or football—are typically American: a huge audience, now participants and not spectators, insisting on all the riches of the world, attainable in the hallucinations and trips of LSD. It is a marvelous image, part of Kesey's 'plan' for a new America. He apparently turned away from fiction because there was too great a separation between audience and author. In the Acid Test, there was no gap: Kesey and audience were one, 'with all the senses opened wide, words, music, lights, sounds, touch—

lightning--' Emerson's desire for an independent, thinking individual comes to this. In a sense, Kesey is Emersonian, carrying the tradition to its conclusion, while ignoring its warnings.

Fritz Perls, a Gestalt psychologist at Esalen, had carried forward Kerouac's idea of the Now trip, which Kesey had hooked into. The Now trip was the philosophy for now: no past, no future, no fantasy—only Now, one's senses open to everything, one's life pivoting on information incoming at the moment. Kesey put it as the way to defeat the lag of one's senses, and to explore what lies outside the lag. With lag, we are always within the film of the past, even if only one-thirtieth of a second behind. That fraction separates us from Now. What is needed is a personal breakthrough, beyond self, history, society. Zen, Blues, Acid are the means. God is there, Emerson's old transcendental experience, waiting for those who can get beyond the lag into the thing itself. [like into the Day-Glo painted trees?] Wolfe's book is a splendid evocation of the Prankster lens as it records on film this aspect of 'American history'."

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