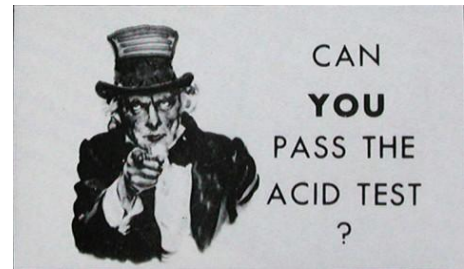


THE ELECTRIC KOOL-AID ACID TEST

BY TOM WOLFE (1968).

Extract from Chapter 11 – The Unspoken Thing.



There is another book in the shelf in Kesey's living room that everybody seems to look at, a little book called *The Journey to the East*, by Hermann Hesse. Hesse wrote it in 1932 and yet... the synch!... it is a book about... exactly ... the Pranksters! and the great bus trip of 1964! "It was my destiny to join in a great experience," the book began. "Having had the good fortune to belong to the League, I was permitted to be a participant in a unique journey." It goes on to tell about a weird, circuitous journey across Europe, toward the East, that the members of this League took. It began, supposedly, as just a journey, to get from here to there, but gradually it took on a profound though unclassifiable meaning: "My happiness did indeed arise from the same secret as the happiness in dreams; it arose from the freedom to experience everything imaginable simultaneously, to exchange outward and inward easily, to move Time and Space about like scenes in a theater. And as we League brothers traveled throughout the world without motor-cars or ships, as we conquered the war-shattered world by our faith and transformed it into Paradise, we creatively brought the past, the future and the fictitious into the present moment." The present moment! Now! The kairos! It was like the man had been on acid himself and was on the bus.

EVERY FRIDAY NIGHT THEY HELD A BRIEFING. BRIEFING WAS

Babbs's term, from his military days in Vietnam. Faye fixes some supper of rice and beans and meat, kind of a stew, and they all go into the kitchen and dig into the pots and put some on a plate and eat. A few joints are circulating around, saliva-liva-livaliva-liva. Then they all go up to one of the tents on the plateau, Page's, and they all crowd in there, sitting this way and that with their legs pulled up under their chins and they start throwing out this and that subject for discussions. Curiously, this is like summer camp, on one level, the Honor Council meeting out in the woods after supper, everything smelling of charred firewood and canvas damp with dew, and crickets and cicadas sounding off and people slapping their ankles from mosquitoes and bugs and shit. On the other hand, the smell of new-mown grass burning and ... the many levels... aren't particularly summer camp. They usually wait for Kesey to start off. He usually starts off with something specific, something he's seen, something he's been doing ... and builds up to what he's been thinking. He starts talking about the lag systems he is trying to work out with tape recorders. Out in the backhouse he has variable lag systems in which a microphone broadcasts over a speaker, and in front of the speaker is a second microphone. This microphone picks up what you just broadcast, but an instant later. If you wear earphones from the second speaker, you can play off against the sound

of what you've just said, as in an echo. Or you can do the things with tapes, running the tape over the sound heads of two machines before it's wound on the takeup reel, or you can use three microphones and three speakers, four tape recorders and four sound heads, and on and on, until you get a total sense of the lag...

A person has all sorts of lags built into him, Kesey is saying. One, the most basic, is the sensory lag, the lag between the time your senses receive something and you are able to react. One-thirtieth of a second is the time it takes, if you're the most alert person alive, and most people are a lot slower than that. Now, Cassady is right up against that 1/30th of a second barrier. He is going as fast as a human can go, but even he can't overcome it. He is a living example of how close you can come, but it can't be done. You can't go any faster than that. You can't through sheer speed overcome the lag. We are all of us doomed to spend our lives watching a movie of our lives—we are always acting on what has just finished happening. It happened at least 1/30th of a second ago. We think we're in the present, but we aren't. The present we know is only a movie of the past, and we will really never be able to control the present through ordinary means. That lag has to be overcome some other way, through some kind of total breakthrough. And there are all sorts of other lags, besides, that go along with it. There are historical and social lags, where people are living by what their ancestors or somebody else perceived, and they may be twenty-five or fifty years or centuries behind, and nobody can be creative without overcoming all those lags first of all. A person can overcome that much through intellect or theory or study of history and so forth and get pretty much into the present that way, but he's still going to be up against one of the worst lags of all, the psychological. Your emotions remain behind because of training, education, the way you were brought up, blocks, hangups and stuff like that, and as a result your mind wants to go one way but your emotions don't—Cassady speaks up: "Blue noses, red eyes, and that's all there is to say about that."

And, for once, he stops right there.

But of course! — the whole emotional lag—and Cassady, voluble King Vulcan himself, has suddenly put it all into one immediate image, like a Zen poem or an early Pound poem—hot little animal red eyes bottled up by cold little blue nose hangups—Cassady's disciple, Bradley, says: "God is red"—and even he stops right there. The sonofabitch is on for once—it is all compacted into those three words, even shorter than Cassady's line, like Bradley didn't even have to think it out, it just came out, a play on the phrase God is dead, only saying, for those of us on to the analogical thing, God is not dead, God is red, God is the bottled-up red animal inside all of us, whole, all-feeling, complete, out front, only it is made dead by all the lags—Kesey giggles slightly and says, "I think maybe we're really synched up tonight"—Somebody starts talking about some kid they know who has been busted for possession, of grass, and the cops said something to him and he said something back and

the cops started beating on him. Everybody commiserates with the poor incarcerated bastard and they comment on the unfortunate tendency cops have of beating up on people, and Babbs says,

"Yeah! Yeah! Right! Right! Right!—but that's in his movie."

In his movie— right right right—and they all grok over that. Grok—and then it's clear, without anybody having to say it. Everybody, everybody everywhere, has his own movie going, his own scenario, and everybody is acting his movie out like mad, only most people don't know that is what they're trapped by, their little script. Everybody looks around inside the tent and nobody says it out loud, because nobody has to. Yet everybody knows at once :::: somehow this ties in, synchs, directly with what Kesey has just said about the movie screen of our perceptions that closes us out from our own reality :::: and somehow synchs directly, at the same time, in this very moment, with the actual, physical movie, The Movie, that they have been slaving over, the great morass of a movie, with miles and miles of spiraling spliced-over film and hot splices billowing around them like so many intertwined, synched, but still chaotic and struggling human lives, theirs, the whole fucking world's— in this very moment—Cassady in his movie, called Speed Limit, he is both a head whose thing is speed, meaning amphetamines, and a unique being whose quest is Speed, faster, goddamn it, spiraling, jerking, kicking, fibrillating tight up against the V30 of a second movie-screen barrier of our senses, trying to get into... Now—

—Mountain Girl's movie is called Big Girl, and her scenario stars a girl who grew up being the big surging powerful girl in genteel surroundings, oh, fin de siècle Poughkeepsie, N.Y., oh Vassar scholars, and who didn't fit into whatever they had in mind for delicate girls in striped seersucker jumpers in faint ratcheting watersprinkler sun jewels on the water drops on the green grass Poughkeepsie, a big girl who's got to break out and she gets good and loud and brassy to come on stronger in this unequal contest—and later in the plot finds out she is bigger in quite another way, and bright, and beautiful.. .

... One looks around, and one sees the Hermit, huddled up here inside the tent, Hermit whom all love but he gets on nerves—why?—and they say Fuck off, Hermit, after which they regret it, and his movie is called Everybody's Bad Trip. He is everybody's bad trip, he takes it upon himself, he takes your bad trip for you, the worst way you thought it could happen—

And Page, with his black jacket with the Iron Cross on it, his movie is called—of course!— Zea-lot. It is as if everyone in here, smelling the burning grass, suddenly remembers a dream Page told them he had while he was sleeping on a cot in a jail in Arizona for, er, turning the citizens on to

... yes ...

—and, of course, everyone in this tent looks at Kesity and wonders. What is his movie? Well, you might call it Randle McMur-phy, for a start. McMurphy, goading, coaxing, leading everybody on to give themselves a little bigger movie, a little action, moving the plot from out of deadass snug harbor. There's a hell of a scene going for you, bub, out here in Edge City. But don't even stop there—

— -and extend the message to all people—