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für Nordamerikastudien

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The Origins of the Psychedelic Movement Through the Lens of

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test

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Coming Together or Coming Apart? Europe and the United States in the Sixties

Intensive Seminar in Berlin, September 12-24, 2011

Professor Russel Duncan

14 October 2011

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In 1968 a phenomenon baffled the national imagination: the transformation of the "promising middle-class youth with all the advantages" into what was popularly known as "the hippie"

The 1960s appear as one of the most culturally complex periods in American history. Nearly all social values were put into discussion, from the “separate but equal” policy to the family structure, from the woman’s role in society to US foreign policy in Vietnam. It would be naïve to argue that such change only came about thanks to political protest songs or the use of hallucinogenic drugs. Rather the process of growing awareness and dissatisfaction with the current society had been underway for a considerable amount of time, and was simply accelerated by an increasing generational divide, a symptom of the coming of age of the baby boomers. What remains undeniable is the influence of what started as youth protests and became the counterculture movement had on reshaping American values, an effect which continues to be felt today.

The myriad of differing movements which made up 60s culture merged together in such a way that today it can be difficult to distinguish them. One of the most problematic to define is the psychedelic movement at the base of the hippie counterculture. Its imagery often overlaps

1 "The Official Site of Tom Wolfe." 01-01-2005. 01-11.2011. <http://www.tomwolfe.com>.

with that of the pacifist and feminist movement, the result being the “peace and love” stereotype. Nevertheless when examined closely, the difference between these movements become clear.

The aim of this work shall therefore be an examination of the origins of this movement in Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters’ experience with LSD. It will try to draw a distinction between them and the other movements that defined the decade and explain how their experience influenced the young generation in the 60s and how their legacy can be still felt in the present.

Key in making this analysis will be what has been described by The New York Times as "not simply the best book on hippies...[but also] the essential book": *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* by Tom Wolfe. This seminal book falls in the current known as New Journalism, a style of writing that became popular in America during the 1960s and 1970s, and applies techniques of fiction to journalistic reporting with the aim of engaging the reader on a more emotional level.

Tom Wolfe, the New Journalism and *the Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*

Tom Wolfe can be identified as one of the main exponents of the New Journalism literary style that developed during the 60s and 70s in America. The term itself took its popular meaning after Wolfe's articles collection *The New Journalism* was published in 1973, but was already in use to define a journalistic writing style that came into style as early as the first years of the decade. The idea at its foundation was to apply fiction techniques to a non-fiction narration, the aim being as Wolfe explains: “to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely the subjective and emotional life of characters.”²

Instrumental to this goal was the use of onomatopoeia, free association, creative punctuation and even more typical features of literary fiction such as conversational speech (rather than quotations or reported statements) and depiction of full scene-by-scene scenarios as fundamental parts of the story.

Beyond Wolfe, other writers whose names are associated with this literary style include: Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion and Robert Christgau. Truman Capote can

2 T. Wolfe and E.W. Johnson. *The New Journalism*. Harper & Row. 1973

also be identified as one of the first writers to extensively use this technique in his 1966 novel *In Cold Blood*, although his preferred definition of that work was the paradoxical “non fiction novel.”³

Further than this blending of literary styles, the feeling of participation of the reader in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is enhanced by the interchange of the narrator. Third person narration is alternated with first person expression by one of the characters. The voice follows not only the character's actions but also his mental process, simultaneously giving the idea of an omniscient narrator and a personal perspective.⁴

That this kind of journalistic approach elicited a series of questions about the reliability of the writing. To what extent could these works be considered “true” and not just the writer's interpretation of events? To what extent does the author's perspective dominate the objectivity of the narration?

It must be said that there is a strong effort on the author's part to maintain his journalistic credibility, as Wolfe himself states in the Author's Note to *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*: “all the events, details and dialogue I have recorded are either what I saw and heard myself or were told to me by people who were there themselves or were recorded on tapes or film or in writing.”⁵

The account of contemporary people becomes thus becomes complex, to the point of incurring the risk of libel and the danger of misrepresenting the personality or the motivations of the person depicted. The availability of material and the openness of people who were present at the moment also narrow the scope of the representation that the author may be able to provide. For example, still in the Author's Note, Wolfe notices: “Sandy Lehmann-Haupt told me about his Pranksters days in especially full and penetrating detail.”⁶ This testimonial clarifies the manner by which the work gained such an articulated and in-depth description of that character.

It is however, important to note Kesey's comment on Wolfe's representation of this experience. While he recognized that Wolfe's interpretation of events was predominantly correct, he carefully noted that the journalist was “on the bus” but not “*on* the bus.” This claim offers an even more interesting perspective considering that being “on the bus” had

3 S. MacFarlane. *The Hippie Narrative. A literary perspective on the counterculture*. McFarland&Company. 2007 p.107

4 *ibid.* p.105

5 T. Wolfe. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Bantam Books, New York, 1968. p. 371

6 *ibid.*

become among the Pranksters a code-word for being part of the group of enlightened people who expand their mind with LSD. In this sense Wolfe was singled out by Kesey as having never been “one of them,” implying that the former preferred the role of observer instead of that of participant. In fact, according to several interviews, Wolfe never tried LSD, and tried marijuana only once.⁷ Most of the material for the book was garnered by watching recorded media or through interviews at Kesey's house in Pleasant Hill, Oregon, after most of the depicted events had taken place.⁸

The reason that Wolfe was welcomed among the Pranksters may be found in his anti-system and mocking disposition. He surely must have looked out of place among them in his white tailored suits and polished shoes. Nevertheless in 1965 he gained an antiestablishment flavour with two satiric articles pillorying *The New Yorker* magazine, making him a valuable ally in their attack on suburban culture.⁹ He also brought a sense of recognition by “real intellectuals” to the movement.

The origins of LSD and Ken Kesey’s early experiences

First synthesized by Albert Hofmann in 1938, a chemist working for Sandoz Pharmaceutical in Basel, Switzerland, LSD-25 had been distributed in the US by the early 50s. The CIA sponsored experiments to find a mind controlling drug, thought to be a useful weapon in the early Cold War stages. What they sought was a speech-inducing substance that could allow them to obtain secret information; but they were also compelled by the mind alteration effect, considered a possible tool in indoctrination and re-setting techniques.¹⁰

Secret tests were carried out in prisons and psychiatric hospitals (the most notorious being those at the Addiction Research Center of the US Public Health Service Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky) with patients not always aware of the nature of the experiment, and sometimes on unwitting subjects. Then, in 1953 the Operation MK-ULTRA was authorized, a program run by a small unit within the CIA named the Technical Services Staff (TSS). Soon the most different subjects became involved in the testing.

In May 1953 the eminent British novelist Aldous Huxley, already interested in the effects of

7 T. Selby (edc). “10 Questions for Tom Wolfe.” Time Magazine, August 28, 2008.

8 S. MacFarlane. *The Hippie Narrative. A literary perspective on the counterculture.* p. 108

9 "Tiny Mummies! The True Story of the Ruler of 43rd Street's Land of the Walking Dead!" and "Lost in the Whicky Thicket"

10 M. A. Lee, and B. Shlain. *Acid Dreams, the complete social history of LSD: the CIA, the sixties, and beyond.* Grove Press, New York, 1985. p. 53

chemical and pharmacological substance as a way of coercion or consciousness alteration, offered himself as a guinea pig under the supervision of Dr. Humphrey Osmond.¹¹ Huxley's novel *The Doors of Perception* (1954) is the result of his experience with mescaline, a related psychedelic drug. The essay elaborates Henry Bergson's theory that the brain is not the centre of cognitive process but rather a filter, a reducing valve, allowing in only the information necessary on matters of survival. When the filter is temporarily suspended through the use of hallucinogens, the doors of perception are suddenly open, permitting a completely new, enlightened vision of the world. Huxley recognised the mysticism of the experience and the similarity with experiences archived through religious and spiritual exercises. While the CIA saw a mind controlling instrument, Huxley saw a self-directed instrument able to expand one's own consciousness. The book was thus the first introduction to these substances and their effects to a large, educated, public.

Another intellectual experimenting with hallucinogenic drugs at this early stage was Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg had already experienced peyote on several occasions and in 1959 took LSD for the first time at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California. His experience was different from Huxley's, and was described as the feeling of being trapped in a spider's web, insignificant, a victim, as later illustrated in his poem "Lysergic Acid." Even so, this would not discourage the poet, who saw the substance as a way to explore the human psyche. This experience that may not always be enjoyable, but it offered a means to escape suburban conformity, and enhance creativity.

It was in this atmosphere and under similar circumstances that Ken Kesey began his experiments with LSD. In 1959 while a graduate student in Stanford University's creative writing program, he came across the CIA-founded MK-ULTRA project carried out at the Veterans Hospital in Menlo Park. Kesey volunteered as a guinea pig for a study of so called "psychotomimetic drugs."¹² Shortly thereafter, he became employed as a night attendant at the Veterans Hospital psychiatric ward, with potentially free access to all manner of psychedelic substances. Sometimes he would go to work high on LSD where his strong and sensitive personality, enhanced by the effects of drugs, enabled him to empathise with the patients in the hospital. Kesey himself later described the experience: "I listened to them and watched them, and I saw that what they were saying and doing was not so crazy after all."¹³ These

11 M. A. Lee, and B. Shlain. *Acid Dreams, the complete social history of LSD*. p. 74

12 *ibid.* p. 134

13 *ibid.*

patients were considered unfit for society, but maybe it was society that didn't fit them.

This experience gave Kesey the material for his first novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). In the book the protagonist R. P. McMurphy, entering the mental hospital a sane man, becomes the unbalancing factor in the ward. What starts as foolish behaviour aiming only at personal gain becomes a struggle to help the inmates realise their individuality. McMurphy doesn't become a guru, a guide, but in a similar way to Kesey, he highlights the weakness of the system and its tools, that can only work thanks to the silent acquiescence of subjected people.

Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters

At the same time as Kesey was working at the Veterans Hospital these new drugs began circulating among his friends. His house on Perry Lane, the bohemian hangout area for Stanford students, became a gravitational force attracting every kind of artist and intellectual. Among them were Larry McMurtry, the young writers Ed McClanahan and Bob Stone, the dancer Chloe Scott, Roy Seburn, Carl Lehmann-Haupt, and Richard Alpert. They all came for "the lane's fabled venison chilli," laced, of course, with LSD.¹⁴ One of the more notable characters in this group was Neal Cassady, the real life alter-ego of Dean Moriarty in Beat novelist Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. He would become the most visible connection between the Beat generation and the soon-to-be hippies.

The instant success of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* attracted even more people to the burgeoning movement. With earnings from the book Kesey bought a big house in La Honda, a woodland setting fifty miles south of San Francisco, as well as a whole set of sound amplification and recording equipment. The entire scene of Perry Lane moved there and gave birth to a group known as the Merry Pranksters.¹⁵ The experiments that started in the CIA-financed laboratories were now being carried out by the guinea pig themselves. Rebelling against the sterile artificial salon setting advocated by more technical scientists (namely Timothy Leary), the Merry Pranksters experimented in the rural, natural surroundings. Music and day-glow paint became stimulants for the LSD experience. From this point on, the creative focus had moved from writing to the experience itself as a form of art.

It is important to note that at this point the use of LSD was not perceived as a passive

14 Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. p. 52

15 B. Dougherty. *La Honda*. Arcadia Publishing, San Francisco, CA, US, 2007

activity but, at least in these early stages, as a way of exploring human consciousness in the very same way described by Huxley. Being a true product of the West Coast, Kesey saw himself and the Pranksters as modern pioneers, testing the frontiers beyond the open doors of perception. On several occasions he even described himself as a new Columbus, charting unknown territory.¹⁶

The year 1964 would be a defining one for the Pranksters, as a result of a number of apparently unrelated events come together:

- The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963, left America shocked and shaken.
- The first major vanguard of baby boomers, born in 1946, turned 18, thereby bolstering the youth culture and further highlighting the generational divide.
- The Beatles had their first number one hit in the American market (*I Want to Hold Your Hand*) revitalizing the American rock and roll scene and starting what came to be known as the British invasion.
- The first student anti-Vietnam war demonstrations took place, featuring marches in the streets of New York and San Francisco.
- The Senate voted on and passed the Civil Rights Act.

While there seems to be no connection among them, the above events clarify the general feeling of change that characterize the year 1964. It was in this context, with the excuse of attending the World Fair in New York and the presentation of Kesey's new book *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964), that the Pranksters embarked on a cross country journey destined to become a legend of 1960s imagery. Kesey and the Pranksters purchased a 1939 International Harvester School bus already equipped for travelling with beds and a sink. They further refurbished it with more beds, shelves and a refrigerator, put a hole in the roof so people could sit outside, and added a platform on the back to carry a motorcycle. It was painted in bright, swirling colours and wired with recording equipment and amplifiers, so as to be able to record and broadcast all the sounds from inside and outside the bus. The bus was re-named "FURTHUR."¹⁷

The influence of the Beat generation's journeys appears clearly on this trip; the idea of a cross country expedition as a metaphor for spiritual discovery in modern America deeply relating to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Kesey would claim that "Everyone [he] knew had

16 S. MacFarlane. *The Hippie Narrative. A literary perspective on the counterculture*. p.108

17 Gene, Anthony. *Magic of the Sixties*. Gibbs Smith. Layton, Utah, 2004. p 35

read *On the Road*, and it opened up the doors to us just the same way drugs did. It gave us a new way to look at America and it stirred us up.”¹⁸

While the Beats were experimenting with words, poetry and post-modernist cut-up style, Kesey made experience itself a form of art. The original idea was to make a movie, and over fifty hours of footage were recorded during, before and following the trip’s conclusion. The hope was to propagate the group’s discoveries of enlightenment to a wider audience in order to convert people to this new attitude toward the world and shake them out of the suburban mentality.¹⁹ Unfortunately the quality was a disaster, almost none of the recording had audio and video synchronized. Later on several documentaries were released with some of the edited material, but “The Movie” as they envisioned, was never realised.²⁰ However, the footage material became an incomparable source of information for Wolfe's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

At the end of the first leg of the 1964 trip the Pranksters arrived in New York. Their centre of interest, aside from the World Fair and Kesey's new book presentation, was the East Coast counter-cultural scene itself. Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs -the founding fathers of the American Beat generation- all made their homes in New York City. Kerouac and Ginsberg did in fact attend one of the Pranksters parties through the invitation of Cassady and Sterling Lord (both Kesey and Kerouac's agent). Kerouac is reported to have been uncomfortable with the wild and colourful exuberance of the Pranksters, particularly their use of the American flag as a decorative item, something he interpreted as derisive.²¹ There was no serious or meaningful discussion between the two writers, Kerouac simply sat on the sofa for an hour, then left.²² “It was like hail and farewell. Kerouac was the old star. Kesey was the new comet from the West heading Christ knew where.”²³

The Beats and the Pranksters were both countercultural movements. The Beats were trying to change literature and their representation of themselves; the Pranksters were trying to change the masses. The latter brought LSD to public awareness and spoke of its “mind-expanding, life-enhancing properties,”²⁴ birthing the psychedelic revolution and the hippie movement. In a later letter to Kerouac's wife (after Kerouac’s death) Kesey expressed his

18 *Magic trip*. Magnolia Pictures (2011)

19 S. MacFarlane. *The Hippie Narrative. A literary perspective on the counterculture*. p. 117

20 In 2011 has been released the documentary film “Magic Trip” made with the original footage.

21 R. Faggen. “Ken Kesey, The Art of Fiction No. 136.” *The Paris Review*

22 L. Sterling. “When Kerouac met Kesey.” *The American Scholar*, Autumn 2011

23 T. Wolfe. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.p. 90

24 Sterling, Lord. “When Kerouac met Kesey.” *The American Scholar*

deep admiration for the *On the Road* author, claiming that “people will be reading *On the Road* centuries from now as the true lens into our time.” Putting themselves in the same “explorer” category, Kesey explained that “he [Kerouac] was part of the ongoing exploration of the American frontier, looking for new land, trying to escape the dust bowls of existence. He had a deep connection to the American romantic vision.”²⁵

A second important event during the 1964 trip was the never-materialised encounter between the Pranksters and Timothy Leary that emphasised the distance between the two most popular approaches to the LSD experience. On their way back from New York City to California the Pranksters stopped at Millbrook, New York, the psychedelic commune base of the International Federation for Internal Freedom (IFIF), Leary's psychological experiment group. The group in the bus was known as ISIS, the Intrepid Search for Inner Space.²⁶ The reception was quite different from the one the Pranksters expected. Leary refused to meet with them, and the overall welcome was cold. The Millbrook group consisted mostly of scholars and behavioural scientists, who kept record of their mental states, wrote papers and gave lectures. Leary despised Kesey recreational use of LSD and the use of the term Acid itself, giving prominence to artificial salon settings and the spiritual experience based on elements of the Eastern Religious traditions with the aim of pursuing a “contemplative life of inaction and meditation.”²⁷ Kesey on the other hand was attempting to broaden the nature of the LSD induced experience, incorporating as many different contexts and view points as possible. “When you've got something like we've got,” he explained, “you can't just sit on it and possess it; you've got to move off it and give it to other people. It only works if you bring other people into it.”²⁸

It is in this social context, that one may explain the unconventional friendship between the Merry Pranksters and the Hell's Angels. Kesey was introduced to the Hell's Angels in 1965 by Hunter Thompson, journalist and author of *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (1966). Kesey turned the infamous motorcycle gang to LSD creating a long lasting relationship. The first large encounter of the two groups is described in Ginsberg's poem *First Party At Ken Kesey's with Hell's Angels* (1965), and in Wolfe's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. The party went on for two days, and was the physical expression of what the Pranksters had been trying to accomplish through their 1964 bus trip:

25 R. Faggen. “Ken Kesey, The Art of Fiction No. 136.” *The Paris Review*, Spring, 1994

26 *ibid.*

27 K. McEneaney. *T. Tom Wolfe's America: heroes, pranksters, and fools*. Praeger, Westport, Conn., 2009 p 35

28 M. A. Lee, and B. Shlain. *Acid Dreams, the complete social history of LSD*. p. 138

They had broken through the worst hang-up that intellectuals know - the *real-life* hang-up. Intellectuals were always hung up with the feeling they weren't coming to grips with real life. Real life belonged to all those funky spades and prize fighters and bullfighters and dock workers and grape pickers and wetbacks. *Nostalgie de la boue*. Well, the Hell's Angels were real life. It didn't get any realer than that, and Kesey pulled it off. People from San Francisco and Berkley started coming by La Honda more than ever. It was practically like an intellectual tourist attraction.²⁹

During the narration of the Hell's Angels Acid Test we also find one of Wolfe's few representations of women in the psychedelic movement, usually portrayed in supporting roles to more daring and edgy males, or as casualties of psychedelic excess.³⁰ He describes a drugged out woman who is gang-raped by a horde of Hell's Angels, she is under the effect of several drugs and does not oppose the behaviour: "There had been one gang-bang, but the girl was a volunteer. It was her movie."³¹ The detachment of the author is evident, implying the Pranksters indifference to the event and forcing the reader to take a distance as well, a perfect example of intersubjectivity.

The same attitude is revealed in another female-centred episode. During the 1964 trip Cathy Casamo (aka Stark Naked) goes crazy when they arrive in Texas. Approaching novelist Larry McMurtry's house in Houston she sees Larry's infant son playing in the yard and, thinking of her child left at home, runs out to hold him, in the process losing the blanket that covered her shoulder and wandering naked in the garden. In the book she is left running off into the desert with virtually no reaction from her Pranksters friend.³² The reader never learns the story of the character, the only information available is that she misses her little child and that she goes around naked covered only with a simple blanket. The reader is asked again to share the Pranksters attitude and not pay attention to this side character.³³ This version of the story has been repeatedly contested by several of the Pranksters present during the trip. In his version of the episode Lerry McMurtry explains how the Pranksters were shocked by the nude scene more than the Texas neighbours. And how, when she left during the night and was

29 T. Wolfe. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. p. 45

30 G. Lamke-Santangelo. *Daughters of aquarius. Women of the sixties counterculture*. University press of Kansas, Kansas, 2009. p.114

31 Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. p.86-87, 177

32 K. McEaney. *T. Tom Wolfe's America: heroes, pranksters, and fools*. p. 31

33 *ibid*.

subsequently arrested by the police, it was McMurtry, his lawyer and her boyfriend who succeeded in having her released and driven back to San Francisco.³⁴

During the second half of the 1960s the countercultural movement represented by the hippies and the political, anti-war movement came together. They all shared the same base (white, middle class students in their twenties), the same rejection of suburban culture, the same disdain for authority and the same enthusiasm for self expression. There were still also notable moments of friction, particularly on how to achieve the goals of personal liberation and transformation of society.³⁵ These discrepancies appear evident during Kesey's speech at the Berkeley Vietnam Day rally in October 1965. The event was part of the first International Day of Protest during whereby demonstrations were held simultaneously in several American and European cities. Nearly fifteen thousand people attended the rally in Berkeley. Kesey arrived accompanied by the Pranksters and a group of Hell's Angels on the Furthur bus, that had been painted blood-red and covered with war memorabilia. During his speech, he shocked the audience by saying that war had been being fought for ten thousand years and they weren't going to change anything by parading around with signs and slogans.³⁶ He then compared activist Paul Jacobs's podium mannerisms to Mussolini's, and ended his speech with a harmonica solo and the suggestion that everyone instead turn their back on the war and simply say, "fuck it."³⁷ In Kesey's eyes, the demonstrations, marches and podium speeches were nothing but a reflected image of the current ruling system; they may promote different values but they still moved within the same mind frame. Kesey's aim was to change this frame, promote personal liberation and a more aware consciousness, and that these would eventually result in a change of the world.

Kesey's involvement in the psychedelic scene came to an end in 1966. With LSD declared illegal in California and facing two trials for possession of marijuana, he organised the Acid Test Graduation, an attempt to please the authorities on one side and return to the Haight-Ashbury scene that had taken over the psychedelic movement during his escape from the authorities in Mexico. The idea Kesey proposed was to go "beyond Acid." He argued that the movement should not be based on drugs alone, and that the time had come to expand the experience on a life long basis. The event is generally considered a failure. The acidheads consider it a betrayal of everything Kesey stood for, a sell out in favour of a lower sentence.

34 K. McEneaney. *T. Tom Wolfe's America: heroes, pranksters, and fools* p 31

35 M. A. Lee, and B. Shlain. *Acid Dreams, the complete social history of LSD.* p. 145

36 *ibid.*

37 *ibid.*

Kesey was finally sentenced to six months in jail and to social work on a farm near La Honda. What the Acid Test Graduation highlighted was that the psychedelic movement has grown bigger than Kesey and the Pranksters, and that they no longer had control over it. In that sense it may even be said that they had succeeded: if their goal was to spread the use of LSD to a broader audience, they had undoubtedly achieved it.

The final pages of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* thus express the bitterness of this final experience. The repetitive lament “we blew it” reveals the feeling of a lost chance to change the world. The Pranksters scattered; some moved near Kesey in Oregon, Cassady left for Mexico, and was found dead after few months outside a small town.³⁸

Conclusions

The 1960s was a decade of questioning for most Americans. While many solutions were proposed, Kesey’s was fundamentally different from those offered by other popular movements. Kesey and the Pranksters didn't embrace the meditative eastern religions, as did Timothy Leary or Allen Ginsberg, who favoured a more “American” approach. Although the literary expression was part of the experience, the Pranksters did not focus on it exclusively like the Beats, and while the latter were mainly concerned with their own self expression, the formers' desire to include the masses becomes a driving element of the movement.

The position of the Pranksters in respect to feminism is more nuanced. Taking into account only Wolfe's version it may be tempting to define the movement as somewhat misogynistic. However considering other narrations of events, it is more probable that this interpretation is in part misled by Wolfe’s prejudices. Without doubt the central figures of the psychedelic scene were men. While the women played a minor role in the movement it should be noted that leaving the family and the safe suburban environment meant also stating women’s self-determination ability, opening the doors to a stronger desire of a more even role in family and society. This change is a feminist statement.

Concerning the use of drugs, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* may overestimate the impact of the Merry Pranksters in the diffusion of the substance. Owsley Stanley (the major producer of LSD from 1963 until his arrest in 1967) and other producers had already found means for large distribution in 1965 while the drug was still legal.³⁹ The difference with the Acid Tests

38 T.Wolfe. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. p. 370-375

39 MacFarlane, Scott. *The Hippie Narrative. A literary perspective on the counterculture*. p.115

was that, even while promoted through underground channels, they were uncommonly public events, facilitating reportage and therefore making the experience accessible for a more widespread audience, who may have not been directly involved in the counterculture.

The broad approach that Kesey fostered, including as many experiences and as many people as possible, allowed the Pranksters to find a larger (if not deeper) audience. Being fully open made Kesey's "revolution" more accessible, but also ultimately more ephemeral and fleeting.

Whatever Kesey's true impact, his myth is long-standing, and the idea of freedom in body and mind that he pursued is a hallmark touchstone of the 1960s.

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