“Furthur”: Reflections on Counter-Culture and the Postmodern

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So the Hieronymus Bosch bus headed out of Kesey’s place with the destination sign in front reading “Furthur” and a sign in back saying “Caution: Weird Load.”

—Tom Wolfe, The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test

Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, as they embarked on their celebrated trip in the summer of 1964, were sign-bearers, a vast signifying machinery, the effects of which reached into nearly every corner of the burgeoning world of 1960s counter-culture. But the sign thus borne was necessarily a divided, differential one: at one end, the avant-garde slogan “Furthur,” toward new paths not only in experience but in the written sign (as well as a falling-off from literacy); at the other, “Caution,” the recoiling of the Prankster gesture around the very eccentricity of the group. Other dichotomies suggest themselves as well: for example, the backward look at historical precedent, but also the newness of technological revision—Bosch doing 60 down the freeway.

1. Tom Wolfe, The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), 63. Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.
There is also a hesitation between "reading" and "saying": the whole Kesey experiment was aimed at the immediacy of saying, the present word, the NOW, but the intervention of literature, of reading and writing, was inescapable.

These are some of the contradictions inscribed in Tom Wolfe's popular narrative *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, a book which not only publicized the exploits of Ken Kesey and his friends, but gave shape to them as a cultural artifact. The two constructs, the events in the narrative and the narrative itself, are in a sense inextricable, though the fault lines of this division, too, are perceptible in Wolfe's text. This essay will take a critical look at Kesey's accomplishments before turning finally to Wolfe's text itself, but first we might consider a prior question: why excavate this particular object at all, the quaint piece of "new journalism" that made Wolfe and Kesey momentarily famous but that has in the interval of two decades been largely forgotten by criticism?

My own answer is implicated in another question: what is the importance of that broader phenomenon, the late-’60s counter-culture, of which the works of Kesey and Wolfe are an important synecdoche or sample? Here it is less the case that critics have forgotten, but rather that they have actively rejected the object and excluded it from serious consideration. Indeed, while the counter-culture is a peripheral object in much of the profuse literature that has recently grown up around the notion of "postmodernism," its accomplishments are generally denied on all sides: by critics on the "right"—traditionalist, highbrow, moralistic—who condemn its laxity and anarchic spirit, its disrespect for the past, and by those of the "left," for whom it is a hopelessly idealistic, superstructural phenomenon, a perverse variant on consumerism, a fashion. To attempt a rescue of the counter-culture, with all its shortcomings, from those accusations would be unwise.

I nonetheless believe that the counter-culture should be read, positively and negatively, with all the intensity of "serious" criticism, first of all because it was in its own moment so decisively there. As a moment in these gray decades of late capitalism the whole phenomenon—hippies and Haight-Ashbury, acid and acid rock, youth culture, Woodstock, the attendant ideologies and other paraphernalia—has left deep tracks in the memory of anyone who lived it. As a marker in the progression of times and styles, or more profoundly as a divide, even a glimpse of the abyss, this moment was the scene of a trauma we are still tending
some two decades later. This at least is a primary reason for undertaking a reading of Kesey and of his chronicler Wolfe, for they are pivotal texts in the articulation of the counter-culture: Kesey at the outset, in the crucible of the early hippie subculture as it separates from its North Beach beatnik matrix, and Wolfe at the point of consolidation, a best-seller, a star in the constellation of mass culture.

We might begin by looking past the relaying device of Wolfe’s text—deferring for the moment a direct look at how it operates—to consider the actual practice of Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. One could describe this activity as a narrative in three main parts: first, the “bus movie,” the epic journey in the psychedelic bus from California to New York and back, in the summer of 1964, an experience that crystallized the group and yielded a mass of film and tape; second, the ongoing communal life, centered on aesthetic experience and experimentation of all sorts, which took place at Kesey’s home in La Honda for about two years (1964-66); and third, the “acid tests,” a series of events occurring through the fall and winter of 1965-66, introducing the psychedelic aesthetic to a widening circle of people around San Francisco and culminating in the Trips Festival in late January 1966. This latter event, with as many as ten thousand participants, while it was the Pranksters’ last big production, became a formative moment for the larger counter-culture. This narrative of Prankster activity would need to be entwined with other concurrent ones to show the whole process by which that counter-culture emerged, but the practice of Kesey and his immediate circle would appear to be a main thread in the larger skein.

But does that activity itself, considered apart from Wolfe’s version of it, constitute a “text” that can be the object of critical study? (A second question must be broached here: is that model of text-object, under study by the critical subject, appropriate to the topic of counter-culture, or the postmodern in general?) An interesting step has been made in this direction by the critic Tony Tanner, who wrote a chapter on Kesey (“Edge City”) in which he suggested: “you could regard the multicoloured bus as Kesey’s third novel, only this time he was inside it and at the wheel.”2 Tanner thus not only suggests that Kesey’s activity is a “work,” an aesthetic product or object, but that it involves a

repositioning, a reorientation of the artist as subject (and, by inference, of the critic-recipient as well) toward that new work, no longer framed and contained, but a trajectory.

Tanner's discussion doesn't wholly account for the radically new basis of that work, though, inasmuch as he assimilates it into the larger series of American authors ("from Emerson to Norman Mailer") that he brings together in his book. Kesey's "third novel" becomes merely a novel means of expressing the same recurrent theme of all those preceding works: the existential positioning of the writer outside his social world in order to articulate a utopian alternative. Why is it important that Kesey is "at the wheel," not detached from his vehicle of expression but part of it, driving right through the continent, impinging on the social realities he encounters? And the larger counter-culture, of which the bus is a significant forerunner, positions itself against, in opposition to, the realities of middle-class culture (though, as it turns out, it comes to share a strategic middle ground with that culture). Tanner's effort to establish continuity between Kesey's innovative work and a traditional thematics of American letters collides with the incommensurability of that work, at the same time as it depends on a conservative impulse, the thematization at work in Wolfe's narrative version. Tanner's chapter, nonetheless, makes clearer the validity of treating these activities—not just the bus trip but all the rest—as text, and on that hypothesis we will proceed.

A more interesting suggestion of literary antecedence occurs in Andreas Huyssen's remarks on 60s counter-culture (in his article "Mapping the Postmodern") when he suggests that precisely the sort of activities brought together in Kesey's work ("happenings, pop vernacular, psychedelic art, acid rock, alternative and street theatre") can be referred back to the "historical avantgarde" of the '20s and '30s, not as nostalgic reprise but as a late flowering ("an American avantgarde and the endgame of international avantgardism"). This relationship helps Huyssen formulate his own definition of postmodernism, based on a shift in the social relations of artistic production, and I believe Kesey's work exemplifies in its own peculiar way that shift. A second main purpose of this study will be to clarify if possible that murky

3. Ibid., 382.
notion of the postmodern. As an approach to that issue, though, I want first to consider to what extent Kesey puts in question the more traditional notion of the sign as tool for representation, a notion on which models such as Tanner's depend.

We might first look back for a moment at the two novels Kesey wrote before embarking on the Prankster trip, because he makes an exemplary passage, around 1960, from one set of aesthetic assumptions to another. While still a graduate student in the Stanford writing program, Kesey stepped into the literary scene with *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), which was followed two years later by *Sometimes a Great Notion*; the formation of the Pranksters group and the activity under consideration began just after that second novel was completed. Despite considerable differences, these two novels together establish Kesey as a promising literary institution—in Wolfe's phrase, "one of the young novelists who might go all the way" (3). More precisely, the novels place Kesey in the modernist tradition in that they expand and refine the techniques of literary representation. *Cuckoo's Nest*, with its schizophrenic narrator, has been widely studied as an experiment in narrative perspective, extending the work of such high modernists as James and Faulkner. In other respects the two novels are innovative as well: in their stylistic precision of dialect voices, in the problematical shifting of narrative function in the middle of *Great Notion*, in the often dense symbolic field of both novels, and in the odd hesitation of the characterizations between mimesis and allegory. In these ways Kesey seems to be following the prescription to "make it new," even as the cultural reference points of his work, in contrast to most high modernist work, turn away from the canonical tradition and toward the commercial schlock of television, comic books, and popular stereotypes. These newer elements are nonetheless contained within the recognizable, traditional gesture of literary representation and indeed carry on the modernist project to preserve the vitality of such representation by expanding its field, renewing its object.

Kesey himself postulates a break, so he begins his experiments with new and often technologically complex sign-systems, a break with literary tradition and with his background as writer; as Wolfe reports it, he resolves to pass beyond "writing" into "new forms of expression" (7-8, 136). What these new forms will evolve into over the next two years is a sort of multi-media performance art, bordering on guerrilla
theatre, using spoken texts, film and video, rock music, and psychedelic lighting effects, and evoking the spontaneous participation of everyone present, without distinction between performer and audience. The results of this peculiar conjuncture have affinities with other recognizable art works of the same period—Warhol, Cage, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe come to mind—and in that way might be understood as a continuation of the modernist project of renovation. Indeed, even the break with "writing" is containable within the more general notion of inscription: the whole spectacle is an embodiment, an engagement of all the senses, but still a technology of "expression" (Kesey's word), an inscribing in space across time, very much like the inscription of any theatrical performance.

While Kesey's break with writing may thus be an illusory or superficial one, the "expressive forms" he assembled do nonetheless mark a break, and that break, I would argue, is the splitting off from modernism of the postmodern. In examining how this happens in Kesey's work, we will necessarily be looking at the same time at the operative field of this problematical term, the postmodern, as it is brought into play by Kesey's practice.

One important level or instance of this is the appearance, scattered through the Pranksters' activity, of a new version of the sublime, understood in the sense given it by Jean-François Lyotard, following Kant, as the attempt to represent the unrepresentable. Such moments for Lyotard constitute the postmodern as an initial phase of what then relapses into the modern, for the representation becomes more familiar, more recognizable, a stable object of consciousness. What is involved is a paradoxical temporality in which the "post-" actually precedes, but the model is not ahistorical: the history of the modern is an ongoing series of such disruptions and sutures, and each new instance of the sublime is specific to its immediate historical context.5

In its most banal version, Kesey's work is first of all the attempt to reenact a new psychic state, to recreate the unprecedented experience of the LSD trip, an "altered state of consciousness" produced by an advanced technology of psychotropic drugs unknown before the 1950s. But that substance and that experience are treated by Kesey and his

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friends as no more than a medium, a specialized lens, through which consciousness itself will be perceived in a new way—what Wolfe calls the NOW. At a central point in the narrative Kesey solemnly lectures his disciples on the need to enter into an absolute present, to bypass the neural lag, the delay in perception, that itself figures a whole array of social and psychological lags, gaps, divisions within the subject, preventing psychic wholeness (129ff.). The ambitious program of acid aesthetic innovation, and finally the acid tests themselves, is to bring an ever-expanding group of people past these lags and divisions into a complete awareness of their own identity, individual and collective, a state of achieved self-presence. The final goal is to transcend representation altogether, to reduce the difference (the re-) to a simultaneity.

How seriously, how literally this project is to be understood is questionable, but the shock of the spectacle that resulted, including the unprecedented proliferation of psychotropic drugs, is undeniable. In pursuit of the ephemeral NOW, Kesey and the others created an aesthetic form whose abrupt departure from pre-existing ones connects it with Lyotard's philosophical notion of the postmodern as a probing of the edge of representability—what Kesey and Wolfe call "edge city."

Perhaps a better way to name this aesthetic experience would be to borrow Fredric Jameson's ironic qualifier and call it a "hysterical sublime," for it seems to match some of the qualities Jameson claims, under this term, for his notion of the postmodern: "euphoria . . . intensities . . . hallucinatory exhilaration."6 Such an aesthetic would, in Kesey's case, be corporeal, somatic, not just intellectual, and it would entail, as Jameson goes on to postulate, the "derealization of the whole surrounding world of everyday reality."7 While it is easy to smile at the naïveté of such a project, and particularly its affirmative pretensions, its quasi-religious faith in the possibility of new levels of consciousness, the more fruitful gesture would be to read such a program, as Jameson encourages us to do, as signifying something beyond itself.

One of the most conspicuous textures in the panoply of sensory experiences assembled by Kesey is described by Wolfe as the technological itself: "electrified guitars and basses and flutes and horns and the

7. Ibid.
light machines and the movie projectors and the tapes and the mikes and hi-fis, all of which pile up in insane coils of wire and gleams of stainless steel and winking amplifier dials . . .” (211). The distinctive musical form, soon to be known as acid rock, that took shape at the acid tests, was, again in Wolfe’s description, a “sound [that] went down so many microphones and hooked through so many mixers and variable lags and blew up in so many amplifiers and rolled around in so many speakers and fed back down so many microphones, it came on like a chemical refinery” (223). And, as the simile suggests, the whole complex spectacle was mediated by a variety of chemical substances, most of all by that sublime synthesis, LSD. What this highly mediated, technological texture suggests—in sharp contrast to that other current in the counter-culture, the more asiatic, organic, simplified aesthetic of meditation, geodesic domes, subsistence farming—is a tendency Huyssen calls “technological optimism,” which he compares with the earlier avantgarde enthusiasm for machinery and industrial production.8 In this respect we can begin to see how Kesey and his practice align with the “historical avant-garde” in its reaction against the more autonomous, “purer” aesthetic found in most works of “high modernism.”

Closely related to this incorporation of technologies is a tendency, already perceptible in Kesey’s written work, to assimilate the popular, the populist, the products of mass culture. Kesey’s basic equipment—film, video, hi-fi—is, after all, the technological basis for that mass culture, rock music being one of its most recognizable forms, and much of what Kesey was doing in the mid-‘60s entered the mainstream of commercial culture a few years later (acid rock concerts and light shows, costuming as fashion, improvised and participatory theatre). The acid text itself, in the domesticated form of the “happening,” became for a time a social commonplace. In short, Kesey’s work, despite its bizarre, perhaps radical aesthetic assumptions, proved to be highly assimilable to mass commercial culture, in part because it took its inspiration from some of the same technologies and tendencies already at work in that cultural sphere.

This quality of popular assimilability, though, already marks out a difference between Kesey’s latter-day avantgardism and its earlier version in the European ‘20s and ‘30s. While those earlier movements

were inherently oppositional, anti-bourgeois, affiliated with radicalism of the left and right, the Pranksters were able to occupy a relatively undisturbed niche in the catch-all pluralism of the American 1960s, and that climate of tolerance, or placid acceptance, helps define the difference between modernism and the postmodern. Even the tension between the elitist aestheticism of the high modernists and middle-class cultural norms has largely dissipated into middlebrow respect within what Huysse1n calls the “museum, gallery, concert, record, and paperback culture of the 1950s.”

This leaves potentially avantgardist gestures such as Kesey’s with very little ground for establishing an oppositional stance; instead, his innovations decline into a readily reproducible, marketable style, and that predominance of style, of surface, in the place of more substantial, socially grounded conflict, is perhaps the clearest definition, and destiny, of the postmodern.

But the assimilable, popular side of Kesey’s work points to another more significant shift in the vector of avantgardism within the historical passage from modern to postmodern: the shifting status of its opposition to the institution of art itself. It is this characteristic, in Peter Bürger’s important theorization of the avantgarde, which best distinguishes the historical avantgarde from concurrent practices of high modernism—namely, that avantgarde movements pose a challenge to the autonomy of the artistic sphere, proposing instead an aesthetic that interpenetrates everyday social life. According to this schema, the innovative works of the high modernists, for all their newness, leave intact the conception of art as a practice wholly separate from the social, whereas in Dada or Surrealism, and above all in the work of Brecht, that relation of autonomy is reversed.

While Kesey’s first novels are somewhat innovative within the established framework of the literary institution, his Prankster activity clearly attempts to redefine the external status of the aesthetic, not just its signifying practices, and this implies at every turn a transformation of everyday social experience. This is perceptible as early as the initial bus trip, when the bus as stage, as artwork, is also a vehicle of intrusion; it invades the ordinary world of the uninitiated, be they gas station attendants, bystanders, or the meditative community of Timothy Leary and

9. Ibid., 21.
the League for Spiritual Discovery. In the conceit of the Pranksters, and tangibly through the act of filming, these onlookers are brought "into the movie," made a part of the work; the separation between observers, the social context of the work, and the work itself is eroded. Any place at all, any social reality, can be invested by the Pranksters, by their disruptive presence and representational machinery, with aesthetic status.

In a more controlled sense the same principle is at work in the acid tests as a form: all distinctions are eliminated, in theory at least, between audience and performers. Everyone's activities and responses are part of the total *mise en scène*, an identification reinforced by the practice of projecting random images, visual or aural, live or through some system of lags, back into the gathering as part of the event. Whereas the acid rock concerts, which came to characterize the Haight-Ashbury subculture, using many of the same elements as Kesey's acid tests, nonetheless reinforce the existing relations of consumer to cultural product, despite all the surface rebellion against commercialization, Kesey's own productions self-consciously overturn those relations and suggest new ones.

In between these terminal points of the bus movie and the acid tests, the less well-defined section of Kesey's work goes even further toward revealing this quality of institutional transformation. What Kesey and his friends do during this intervening period is to establish at Kesey's "ranch" in the woods of La Honda, California, a mode of everyday life wholly saturated with their psychedelic aesthetic. Conventional economic relations are suspended as Kesey is able to subsidize the collectivity with the substantial royalties earned by his novels. The mass of raw film footage shot on the bus creates a focus of sorts: the assembled Pranksters function partly as a large film production crew, engaged in the Sisyphean task of editing the footage into releasable form. The energies of the group generate a sort of vortex, though, into which are drawn increasing numbers of creative, alienated, picturesque additions to the community: literary characters from the Bay area, most notably Allen Ginsburg; sculptors and graphic artists, who transform the landscape into a designed set or scene; the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang; and miscellaneous drop-outs, drug freaks, and vagabonds, along with Owlsley, the notorious LSD manufacturer. Together this extraordinary cast creates an everydayness at variance in every way with social norms.
outside La Honda, while that new set of social relations and habits, marked at every turn by self-conscious aesthetic experimentation, the production of art in a wide variety of mediums, becomes itself an extension of "the work," of the bus movie or the acid tests, now inextricable from the everyday.

Such a structural transformation of relations between the social and the aesthetic, while carried to an extreme in Kesey's case, has parallels in the California counter-culture at about the same time. For example, the manifesto "Trip without a Ticket," distributed by the Communications Company on the street in Haight-Ashbury in the spring of 1967, calls on its readers to become "lifeactors," to make their everyday lives into a "guerrilla theatre" whose "aim is to liberate ground held by consumer wardens and establish territory without walls."11 Inspired by the Diggers, whose pageantry and counter-institutions (a moneyless store, free communal meals) helped define the hippie subculture in its early phase, the broadside is clearly calling for a different social understanding of art: "Not street-theater, the street is theater."12 In a similar vein Ron Davis, founder and director of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, in his essay "Guerrilla Theatre: 1967," calls for a change in the theatrical institution, a change that derives from the reorientation of the everyday lives of people in the company: "You must begin by dropping out, getting away, leaving behind, dumping, junking the waste of dishonorable middle-class institutions, groups, ideas," creating "a lifestyle that replaces . . . middle-class capitalistic assumptions with a lifestyle that won't quit . . . a full-time job of a full-time guerrilla."13 The Mime Troupe itself explored through the mid-'60s a variety of ways to convert the social space of sidewalks and parks into theatrical space, articulating very different themes than Kesey and the Pranksters, but calling into question some of the same assumptions about art.

The avantgardist project to aestheticize the everyday and thus to break down the institutional autonomy of art, revived as we have seen not only by Kesey but by other elements of the counter-culture, would seem to entail a radical political premise as well. Certainly in the case

12. Ibid., 104.
of the Diggers and the Mime Troupe the intrusion of the theatrical is intended to put in question the values of middle-class culture, including especially its tendencies to regimentation and militarism, and also its conception of social relations as purely functional, instrumental, lacking the spontaneity and imaginativeness of guerrilla theatre. While Kesey’s own pronouncements are less explicitly political, more metaphysical, his work shares the same general tendency to question the values of a social consensus organized around notions of discipline, functionalism, conformism, and material reward. Such a challenge clearly opposes itself to the cold war mentality of the 1950s and early ‘60s and to the effort to mobilize the nation in support of the Vietnam War. Kesey’s practice has perhaps more in common with the anarchistic, libertarian tendencies of Dada than with the more coherent, Marxist intentions of surrealism or constructivism, but it does embody an oppositional politics, tinged with utopianism, firmly against the social status quo.

It is then reasonable to claim that the Prankster activity, along with some other early instances of ‘60s counter-culture, faithfully carry on the challenge posed by the “historical avantgarde” to the autonomy of art, and yet a historical difference, which is the distinction between the modern and the postmodern, quickly asserts itself. What is indeed striking about the aesthetic rebellion initiated by Kesey, by the Diggers and the Mime Troupe and other alternative theatre groups, a movement that blossoms into the large hippie subculture of the late 1960s, is the ease with which it is assimilated into the consumer culture of late capitalism. A few specific instances are instructive. The widening circle that grows from acid tests to be-ins and happenings eventually culminates in the Woodstock Festival of August 1969, an event whose commercial basis is easily demonstrated. The logistical organizer of the Trips Festival, Bill Graham, launched his own highly successful entertainment business a few months later, incorporating much of Kesey’s aesthetic into the commercial format of his concerts at the Fillmore ballrooms, first in San Francisco and then in New York. An interesting footnote to this development is the violent conflict that broke out in 1970 between Graham and the remnants of a genuinely oppositional,

anti-capitalist subculture in the East Village of New York, who wanted to use the Fillmore East for free-form, non-commercial gatherings rather like Kesey's. Graham called the cops, making official his affiliation with the forces of order against the anarchic tendencies of the hippies.15

Beyond these specific indications of a passage from insurgent to administered culture, though, one can read already in the initial project of Kesey and the others the traces of a new and sinister form of cultural control. For the whole attempt to aestheticize everyday social relations accords, finally, with a shift in consumerism taking place at the same time, a shift embodied in the newly coined term “life-style.” This notion represents an important step beyond an earlier consumerism, based on the marketing of particular commodities; instead, the entirety of one's life becomes identified with the series of purchases that define a style, now a life-style, that subsumes the identity of the consumer. Lifestyle is a notion that apparently begins on the margins, in the sphere of the “alternative”—hippie lifestyles, radical lifestyles—but the alternative already implies a prior choice: middle-class lifestyles, suburban lifestyles, etc. As commercial television completes, in this same decade, its conquest of the social imagination, with its much-noted interpenetration of explicitly commodified microcosms (commercials) and implicit ones (the idealized, carefully styled worlds of the programs), the aspiration toward a wholly aestheticized surface of everyday life becomes general in the society, or at least in its affluent sectors.

Against this backdrop the efforts of Kesey and the counter-culture in general assume a quite different value. In a sense they represent a truly alternative path toward the aestheticized everyday: hand-crafted identities or life-styles, costumes derived from third-world or other marginal sources, underground or occult cultural practices, the use of illicit drugs, and a measure of personal control over the representational machinery of tapes, film, video, etc. Of course within a few years most of these defining marks of the counter-culture will be commercially marketed: hip boutiques in department stores, mass circulation of acid rock records and other “underground” media, even a regularized circulation of recreational drugs. More significantly, though, the notion of equivalence between “life” and “style”—the reduced form of the

interpenetration of the social and the aesthetic—is accelerated and confirmed by the conspicuous example of the hippies. While the desire to drop out of the exchange economy is far from reinforced—how to purchase the commodified forms of personal identity except by carrying money?—the desire to have a seemingly self-created identity or life-style, a "look," to occupy a place on the spectrum from hip to straight, radical to conservative, becomes inevitable for the whole mass of consumers once the "alternative life-style" asserts itself. The existence of the alternative necessitates choice. Trying to break out of the narrow range of choices apparently available in the more restricted economy of the 1950s, Kesey and others participate in the widening of that range, but ironically in perfect synchronization with the needs of producers to broaden the concept of commodity into the totalizing notion of life-style. The nearly universal acceptance of this term by the early 1970s, coupled with the near disappearance of genuine resistance to capitalist exchange of the sort demonstrated by the Diggers and other proto-hippies, helps confirm the instrumental use that was made of counter-culture by consumer capitalism at a critical moment of transformation.

What we have seen thus far, in looking closely at the texture of Kesey's activity, is its affinity with avantgardism in that it immediately challenges its social context as art. But whereas earlier European instances of avantgardism could take place along side of, and within, serious movements to transform the entirety of social relations, such a possibility never really existed in the United States of the 1960s, despite all the revolutionary-utopian rhetoric to the contrary. That absence of political possibility, as Huyssen and others have suggested, is what makes this specific instance of avantgardism postmodern. The exceptional, energetic attempt of Kesey and the Pranksters to redefine the relation between social and artistic practice is remarkable, first, as the inscription of a desire to elude the increasingly total administration of cultural practice by powerful interests centered in the broadcasting industry, but spread more generally through all the forms of ideological production. But secondly, the fated commodification of the counter-culture demonstrates the assimilative power of that "official" culture and its concealed dominance over even the most evidently adversarial cultural practices.

But the technological surface of the Prankster productions suggests a
still broader relation of this “postmodernism” to modernity and the historical era of late capitalism. We have noted that affinity with the technological that is common to both the historical and counter-cultural versions of the avantgarde. Despite the apparent similarity, a considerable difference separates, as Jameson has noted, the former’s interest in the machinery of production from the latter’s preoccupation with machines for re-production, or representation. In place of the factory, the diesel engine, the airplane of an earlier iconography, Kesey’s work doesn’t so much represent as it engages an array of image-bearing technologies: the projection screens, the audio coils, and so forth. This tendency is observable in much other work considered “postmodern,” from Warhol’s foregrounding of his own silkscreening process to John Barth’s practice of meta-narration or the self-conscious montage of decorative motifs in Venturi’s buildings. The shift strongly suggests, on one level, a change in preoccupation from a production-based economy, organized around the disciplines of labor, to a society of leisure, of amateur “artistes” and television addicts. Kesey’s practice, I would argue, is one of those “energetic postmodernist texts,” as Jameson formulates it, which “seem somehow to tap the networks of reproductive process and thereby to afford us some glimpse into a post-modern or technological sublime.” The main interest of such a “glimpse,” though, is not the sociological truism of a turning toward leisure, but the “figuration” embodied in such practices of “the whole world-system of present-day multinational capitalism.”

We might reflect for a moment on how this general theory of the postmodern informs a reading of Kesey’s overall practice, before looking at a few specific instances in Wolfe’s text. What Jameson would imply is that the whole Prankster trip gives inadvertent, figural representation to the otherwise unrepresentable, complex, diffuse, multi-layered world-system that is just coming of age in the 1960s. One can sense this in the self-conscious establishment of the Pranksters as a community, within the walls of their bus or the enclosure of La Honda (an artificial, ideologically contrived community in place of the degraded, universal form just becoming known as the “global village”).

17. Ibid., 79.
18. Ibid.
or in the synthetic texture of so much of Kesey’s aesthetic (the modulated and recombined imagery that belongs to that larger array of simulations of the natural offered up as “new age” commodities). But perhaps the most evocative relation between the Pranksters’ activity and that larger system may be seen in their transcendent quest for the NOW, the effort underlying so much of Kesey’s work to distort and suppress linear temporality, and thus historicity, in favor of an all-embracing simultaneity, the self-presence of the mind and all its traces of remembered sensation, brought together in the sublimely elevated consciousness of the LSD trip. That erasure of history, the swallowing up of the past by the present moment, is of course a familiar topos in American culture and has not surprisingly appeared in the corporate culture that has followed American economic hegemony across the globe. One need only consider the new “international style” of architecture, the postmodern, with its juxtaposition of divergent styles and periods, for a concrete example of the same mentality. Or on another level, the chains of identical McDonalds or Hiltons that extend across the planet could be seen as exemplifying the cultural bonds that continue to tighten their hold almost everywhere. Finally, what Kesey’s productions figure is a system of instantaneous communications, gathering up all the signals into an increasingly integral network. Whereas for Kesey and his co-workers, grounded in a tradition of transcendentalism, the signified is the individual subject, the electronic system of the brain, and the possibility of inter-subjective immediacy (a kind of mystical, psychic communication), the lines of signification lead beyond that idealized configuration toward the reality of centralized corporate communications, electronic intelligence systems, that most recent technological revolution associated by Ernest Mandel with capitalism in its latest stage.19

This overview of Kesey’s practice leads finally to a double reading. From the vantage point of the particular subject—Kesey, the other Pranksters—the signifying process of bus trip, acid tests, etc. becomes the liberatory unveiling of a new state of consciousness, self-presence, inter-subjective understanding; at the same time, these activities describe or figure the objective achievement of a global communications

network, of information systems, of centralized power in the hands of conglomerate corporations and the state. But these two disparate readings are already prefigured in Lyotard’s essay on The Postmodern Condition, in the relation of two of his key terms there: the grands and petits récits. Kesey, I think, and the counter-culture as a whole offer themselves as a “little narrative” (or “white lie”) a localized and idiosyncratic challenge to the positivistic, instrumental epistemology of the dominant culture. The Pranksters put in question the rationalism of ordinary knowledge in favor of their own transcendent claims; they put aside rational limitations on what constitutes art, as well as the rationalized way of life practiced by the middle classes. In Lyotard’s other, closely associated term, what Kesey makes is “paralogy,” “a move . . . played in the pragmatics of knowledge.” This is true first of all in the domain of art; Kesey’s, like all avantgardist work, is a shift in the rules of aesthetic practice. More significantly, though, the counter-cultural norms introduced by the Pranksters are a social paralogism, a new and challenging social pragmatics. In both respects Kesey exemplifies, I think, what is for Lyotard the productive, positive aspect of the postmodern: its capacity to escape the existing rules and disrupt the dominance of established norms, if only for a time.

At the same time, though, as it plays out its role as paralogism, Kesey’s work shows, in a disturbing way, the recuperation of such petits récits by what Lyotard calls grands récits, the hegemonic master-narratives that inform the pre-existing hypostatized norms of knowledge. This, it seems to me, is what the other reading of Kesey brings to light: the encoding in his work of a narrative of technological domination, in which the enlightenment of the individual subject is implicated in systems of centralized control. Kesey aligns himself with the doctrine of progress—he is “the pioneer,” taking “the next step,” “furthur”—which arrives in our century, as the Frankfurt School has shown, at the rationalized administration of culture that is the underside of Kesey’s radical individualism. This double reading of Kesey’s place in the culture helps reveal the disguised identity of these two récits, the inscription

20. Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, 60ff.
21. Ibid., 61.
already of the *petit* in the *grand*, the role of paralogy as diversion within the system rather than an external challenge to it. In short, the practice of paralogy realizes the danger acknowledged already by Lyotard: it collapses into mere “innovation . . . under the command of the system.”²³ The mechanisms of fashion, of the new, indeed of modernism itself, belong to the system of modernity; they are unable to pose a serious threat to it. Lyotard’s postmodern is ultimately “a part of the modern, . . . not modernism at its end but in its nascent state.”²⁴ All these are ways of denying to the paralogism, to the postmodern, any but a momentary transformative power and are thus affirmations of the assimilative power of the *grands récits* and the social domination they represent.

Such broader considerations as these are echoed in the text before us, in a moment of Kesey’s career and a passage in Wolfe’s account, that we can assuredly call “central.” The phrase “in the center,” in fact, occurs at the beginning of the passage, with ritual insistence, twice. Furthermore, the moment in the narrative it describes is central, the culmination of the Pranksters’ work when they communicate their achieved aesthetic to thousands of initiates at their last acid test, the Trips Festival of January 1966. Despite the apparent chaos, the effects of chance, and the multi-centered accumulation of points of interest, Kesey’s production responds to the impulse for centering, and what inhabits the center is Control: “And in the center of the hall—the Pranksters’ tower of Control . . . a great scaffolding of pipes and platforms in the center of the hall.” Here a small group of insiders manage all the equipment, “all the mikes and amplifiers and spots and projectors and all the rest of it” so the apparently random motion of countless individuals can be organized, synchronized, made into a kind of unity as it enters the system of representational machinery. What is thus installed, centrally, is not only the objective presence of the Work, but also, strangely disguised yet fully apparent, the Subject, the artist responsible for the work: “Kesey, meanwhile, was up on an even higher plateau of control, up on a balcony in a silver space suit complete with a big bubble space helmet.” Such a presence is in a sense trans-subjective—the persona of Kesey merges with one of his comic book heroes, much as his fictional heroes do, and becomes a sort of

²⁴. Ibid., 79.
Buck Rogers space explorer, only within the interior space of hallucinatory consciousness. The attempt to disperse his identity, to disguise his central role in the proceedings, fails: “everyone recognized the Space Man immediately, of course” (232). But exactly what is recognized remains in doubt. The metaphor of the trip? Kesey’s own image of himself as pioneer? But such a figure would be found at the edge, furthest from the center. On the other hand, the figure of the astronaut, that real-life hero of the state-controlled technocracy, imposes itself in this context of control, power, and visibility.

Kesey is recognized; he has become something of a celebrity within the well-established mechanism for generating celebrities, a primary mechanism of the official culture industry. But Kesey is more specifically recognized as a writer, ironically enough in view of his open break with the “artificial rules” of “syntax” (136). He stands on his elevated perch with “a projection machine with which you could write messages on acetate and project them in mammoth size on the walls” (232). Kesey retains, finally, the implements of his authority. He is recognizably the writer here, the author of the spectacle, which is centered on his notions of synchronicity, community, and communications. Finally, what that spectacle consists of is an enormous, elaborate restoration of that discarded notion of syntax, hardly the overcoming of temporality but the arrangement of a formidable vocabulary of signifying elements into an ordered succession through the mediation of the control tower. What Kesey writes is the distillation of his transcendent gnosis: “Anybody who knows he is God go up on stage” (234). The claims of writing and of authorship are thus erected visibly, exhibitionistically, at the center of this project to displace both.

Nor is this issue of control an isolated problem at this moment in the Prankster trajectory. The problem is implicated in Kesey’s project from the beginning, that is, from his first experience of LSD in a Veterans’ hospital as part of a federally-sponsored experiment; indeed, LSD is thought to have been synthesized as a tool for thought control, interrogation, psychological warfare, a cold war weapon that got loose.25 Kesey himself noted later that his only “pure” experience of the drug was government-administered.26 In short, the chemical stimulus for

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this counter-cultural effort of "mind expansion" stems from suspiciously totalitarian roots, and this centralized source is then reduplicated in the figure of Kesey in control of the Pranksters' collective experience, in control of the acid tests, a cult figure, a substitute authority.

That image of Kesey as Space Man in his control tower, though, points to another, more immediate source for the authority in the passage: Wolfe's own, as author of the narrative we actually read in order to reflect on Kesey and the rest. The episode of the Trips Festival is at the center of Wolfe's text, more so than of Kesey's project, inasmuch as that project was by nature decentered, outward moving, oriented toward the "furthur." Wolfe, on the other hand, makes a neat structure of the events, with the acid tests as the summit of the "rising action," the peak of Kesey's celebrity before he begins his long slide down toward a denouement of obscurity and isolation, and thus irrelevance for the world of spectacle it is Wolfe's task to document.

The power to impose an epic shape on the loose materials of Kesey's adventures is one of the main lines of control exercised by Wolfe. He, in fact, designs a very traditional narrative container, beginning near the chronological end, flashing back to Kesey's background and early career, then pursuing chapter by chapter the main events of the Prankster period, before he closes the parentheses and rejoins his opening scene near the end of the book. Within this framework, with its strong effect of closure, Wolfe creates something like a classical tragedy: the rise to prominence of a larger-than-life hero and the discovery of a flaw—arrogance, failure to acknowledge limitations—that gradually overtakes the hero and leads to his undoing. Kesey is left at the end an object of pity, emptied of his charismatic charm, largely abandoned by his followers, played out, burnt out—an implicit warning to the rest of us.

It is interesting to compare Wolfe's epic machinery with Kesey's own in the one parallel written text that Kesey has published. This is the screenplay "Over the Border," unproduced but included in the volume Kesey's Garage Sale (1973), a text in which Kesey dramatizes his flight from prosecution on a drug charge and his sojourn in Mexico. He, too, is aware of the "tragic hero" model and designs an autobiographical character with a similar flaw: impiety, megalomania, an excessive ego, errors which lead to the death of the hero's young child. At this moment in the plot, though, the other characters convene and vote narrowly in favor of retaking the scene, now that the Kesey figure
has learned his lesson. The text slips into reverse, is rewound, and ends with the triumphant re-shooting of the scene, now played as a heroic rescue.27 By means of this camp device, Kesey thumbs his nose at the form imposed by Wolfe and at the general notion of linear time on which that form depends. He substitutes a kind of technological virtuosity borrowed from home movies—the exhilaration of running it backwards—coupled with the gratuitous happy ending of popular entertainment, the evacuation of serious drama in the interest of an all-powerful, though degraded, editing function. In this second, overtly parodic version the instance of control is more visibly present, but in its crude technologism it forgoes the more subtle manipulation which is the source of Wolfe’s control and subjects the whole notion of such control to corrosive laughter.

What this brief comparison of narrative method suggests is a sharp difference between Wolfe and Kesey in their approaches to narrative structure. Wolfe’s account is organized in a traditional and recognizable way to produce what John Gardner might have called a “moral fiction”; Kesey, by contrast, is working against the fundamental norm of linearity, of succession, to represent the present moment as elastic, subject to re-version, somehow suspended outside the empirical flow of time. The experience of time in that new, finally anti-narrative way, given the dependence of narrative on succession, furthermore gives rise within the screenplay to feelings of exhilaration, even hilarity, that belong to the notion of the hysterical sublime as we have discussed it. Representability itself is in question in the device of “rewinding” the narrative, “retaking” the scene: what emerges is, on the one hand, a notion of narrative that has slipped the traditional bonds of linearity and non-contradiction, liberating a certain playfulness or fantasy, while, on the other, what emerges, in a parodic mode, is the actuality of technological control, the power of new electronic media to shape, alter, and reconstruct their representations of the “real.”

The imposition of epic structure is only one, albeit an important one, of the instances of control exercised by Wolfe over Kesey’s work. A second instance might be found in the image of Kesey himself in the scene we just looked at, the image we described as “imperfectly disguised anonymity.” Kesey’s authorial control at the center of the spectacle

27. Ibid., 167.
is utterly recognizable, though displaced into the fictionalized persona of the Space Man, but that displacement and its recognizability are neatly matched in the narrative technique Wolfe places at the center of his own method: the use of what he calls the "downstage voice," a third-person narrator who is on the scene, subjectively implicated in the action. What is notable in the method of The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test is Wolfe's kaleidoscopic shifting from one to another of these personae, coupled with idiomatic phrasing and some stream-of-consciousness to suggest a highly subjective but trans-personal experience of the events he describes. Wolfe himself, though he appears as first-person narrator at the start and finish of his book, is altogether absent from the central narrative sequences . . . and yet, as every reader of his text must be aware, he is everywhere recognizable, unmistakably present in the heavily mannered style that colors each of his "downstage voices." Wolfe himself makes extensive note of, even while trying to minimize the importance of, these many "mannerisms"; he goes on to observe how frequently his "new style" has been parodied. That style, those mannerisms place a seal of authority, of authorship on the whole of the text and signify the activity of the writer in shaping the text, exerting control over it. Wolfe's voices, like Kesey's helmet, are a transparent disguise.

These instances of control—and various other sorts could be discovered—suggest the thoroughly divergent vectors of Kesey's and Wolfe's respective works: the former an experiential or lived work, like theatre in its liveness, only partially extant in Kesey's private archives of film and tape; the latter a rather more conventional published narrative, indeed a best-seller. In some important respects the two may nonetheless be aligned: both, for example, belong to a much broader cultural rebellion during the 1960s of the populist, popular, or pop against highbrow or elitist norms associated with high modernism. Even with the occultation or obscurity of much of Kesey's aesthetic experimentation, his acid tests and other antics both prefigured and evolved into forms of entertainment and of mass behavior, a life-style that defined the counterculture at its most widespread. Wolfe's publication is only a slightly later moment in that movement, the mature phase of entrepreneurial

29. Ibid., 21-22.
management; Wolfe, like Bill Graham of the Fillmore ballrooms or the promoters of Woodstock, knew how to turn a profit out of a simulated version of such cultural rebellion. Indeed, the kaleidoscopic point-of-view in Wolfe’s narrative, as we have seen, is a transposition into narrative terms of the mechanism, call it spontaneity/control, at work in Kesey’s productions. The packaging, in other words, of Kesey’s live performance in Wolfe’s narrative should be seen less as a betrayal than as an inevitable development. The traces of Wolfe’s manipulations are the marks of adaptation, as Kesey’s amorphous, heterogeneous work is inserted into the stricter confines of the consumable product.

It is also useful, though, to reflect on what is particular and challenging in Kesey’s gestures and in the particular moment of the postmodern for which he stands. While looking first at the specifically new kinds of signifying practices the Pranksters engaged in, one discovers their chief interest is finally not in the internal relations of the sign. Kesey’s signifiers are complex, technologically engaging, but not so thorough a break with more traditional writing as he supposed. It is arguable that in the overwhelmingly new experience of the LSD trip, and in its Prankster-induced simulations, Kesey evokes a version of the sublime. The challenge to representability in his notion of the NOW is hardly a new aesthetic problem, though, and the high seriousness of Kesey’s metaphysics is hard to take seriously; still, his technical virtuosity leaves its mark.

Where this activity is more productive is in the external relation of the sign to its social context. The avantgardist challenge to accepted modes of consumption, the challenge posed with aesthetic tools to everyday social relations, also not without precedents, goes further toward achieving its ambitions. For a time in the mid-1960s, I believe, the counter-culture, with Kesey in its vanguard, did manage to question the proper place of art and aesthetic experiment and did establish, first for dozens and then thousands of adherents, a different relation between that art and social realities. The ecstatic possibility of a hip, communitarian revolt against consumerism, administered culture, and instrumental social ties, while imperfectly realized, nonetheless helped, and helps, make visible the nature of the dominant but often unspoken rules that were broken. In this I would agree with Lyotard: such breaches, however small and momentary, are healthful, enlightening, an important stage of resistance to the official culture.

On the other hand, as Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson, among
others, have suggested, such gestures by themselves are finally lacking in real force.\textsuperscript{30} They are, in the postmodern situation, cut off from oppositional social practice; their mode of resistance is ineffectual, highly recuperable. This fact is neatly illustrated by Wolfe’s text, and the pair Kesey/Wolfe make an instructive study in the mechanisms of that recuperation.

The failure in actuality of the utopian promises raised by Kesey and the counter-culture, while obviously qualifying whatever judgments we might make about them, is hardly cause to dismiss them altogether; we might well ask whether it is even an appropriate gesture at this time for criticism to make endorsements, or refuse them. In the absence of real alternatives to affirm, locally at least, we are left with the task of reading our cultural texts, even the degraded or commodified ones offered up as “postmodern,” as rigorously as possible, in order to understand better the bind we at present inhabit. Kesey and Wolfe’s “texts” are, in this sense, productive ones. We can read in them a wealth of desires: to assert control over the representational machinery of mass culture; to escape the rationalized boundaries of that culture and the social relations it enforces; to achieve an ahistorical, wholly present time and a self-present subjectivity called “higher consciousness”; to extend that perfected subjectivity into the inter-subjective, the utopian community; and to reproduce these desires in a legible “text” for a mass audience. All these aspirations are given voice in the bus movie, in the acid tests, in the entirety of Kesey’s activity with the Pranksters; the breadth of that project is registered not only in Wolfe’s book but in the impact of Kesey himself on the larger effort to create a counter-culture.

The largeness of the illusory solution, though, should be seen as an index of the larger dilemma. Kesey’s work also reads as a coded inventory of the very forces he is trying to subvert: centralized social control, technologism, an increasingly totalizing culture industry, and curiously, a stabilization of the sign within the permissive, eclectic field of “postmodernism.” Far from provoking a crisis in signification or in social relations, Kesey and the movement he stands for have ultimately strengthened the existing system on each level and thus affirmed the assimilative power of the dominant culture. The bind they thus indicate stands as a terminus of sorts for the psychedelic bus, and for the postmodern.