Tom Wolfe’s Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test as Bergsonian Satire

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Arriving in the San Francisco garage where the Pranksters are waiting for Ken Kesey in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), Tom Wolfe engages in a discussion on metaphysics with “Hassler” (Ron Bivert). What follows is Bergsonian. Henri Bergson’s theory of Aristotelian comedy in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1901) states that “Society will…be suspicious of all inelasticity of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates: in short it is the sign of eccentricity” (19; italics in original). While Wolfe has argued throughout his career and especially in his “Introduction” to *The New Journalism* (1973) that his non-fiction narratives are “true”—that he takes facts and writes about them with novelistic techniques borrowed from realist and naturalist authors such as Émile Zola—his viewpoint is conservative. This is evident throughout *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and is especially apparent on pages 19-20 during a passage in which he fixates on Hassler’s toothbrush during an intellectual discussion. As Hassler illustrates an argument about “transcending the bullshit,” outlining “a pyramid in the air with his hands,” Wolfe writes, “I watch, fascinated, as the plastic toothbrush case shiny shiny slides up one incline of the pyramid” (20). Bergson stresses that “Any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person, when it is the moral side that is concerned” (50-51; italics in original). Wolfe’s interest in the material at a time when Hassler is describing a type of transcendence, however incoherent, is not only Bergsonian in its observation of the incongruity between the physical and the intellectual but also expressive of Wolfe’s material construction of status. Thomas L. Hartshorne argues that “Throughout his career, Wolfe’s central concern has been status, how it is defined, established, differentiated, and enforced, how people react to status clashes and anxieties, and how various subcultures erect alternative status systems to those prevailing in the dominant culture or in other subcultures” (148-149). Status in Wolfe’s writing is understood and represented objectively through materiality. In “Tom Wolfe, Material Boy: Embellishing a Doctrine,” Rand Richards Cooper asserts, “Against modernism’s emphasis on psychological states, interiority, and the writer-as-creator, Wolfe stressed objectivity, and the writer-as-recorder” which does not prevent him from “[e]avesdropping not only on conversations, but on minds” (11). Explaining the importance of materiality in his “Introduction” to *The New Journalism*, Wolfe writes about the need to record “status life”: “This is the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene” (32). His “fascination” in the passage quoted above is for a marker of middle-class cleanliness, slyly suggesting that Hassler does not belong in his own rebellion. Wolfe’s decision to highlight Hassler’s “mechanical inelasticity,” to use Bergson’s term, indicates his own conservative viewpoint (10; italics in original). While the Prankster behaves like an automaton, eccentricity can only be ridiculed from the centre, which is where Wolfe locates himself.
Works Cited


