

Acting like an Actress

Carol Iannone

Tom Wolfe's big bestseller from the 1980s, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, has had a long shelf life, so to speak, and continues as a variegated cultural phenomenon. It began as a serial in *Rolling Stone* in 1984–85, and then, substantially rewritten, emerged as a novel in 1987 to blockbuster status. It was made into a glitzy, ritzy, big budget film in 1990 by noted Hollywood director Brian De Palma, with screenplay by Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Michael Cristofer, and with Tom Hanks, Bruce Willis, and Melanie Griffith in the leading roles, all established young stars who went on to major success.

Such an event did the film promise to be that De Palma granted to Julie Salamon, the *Wall Street Journal* film critic of that time, nearly unprecedented access to the entire production process, from casting to filming through release. Her book about the experience, *The Devil's Candy: The Bonfire of the Vanities Goes to Hollywood*, itself became a bestseller in 1991. Renamed *The Devil's Candy: Anatomy of a Hollywood Fiasco* after the film became a disappointing failure as soon as it opened in 1990, Salamon's book was reissued in a new edition on its tenth anniversary in 2001 with an afterword by the author, and again on its thirtieth anniversary in 2021, with a postscript from her. The new additions offer updates on ongoing responses to the film and on the subsequent careers of many of the principals, especially De Palma.

Entertainment formats continue to develop, and a report in 2016 indicated plans to make *Bonfire* into a multi-part series, although that has yet to happen. What *has* happened is a seven episode podcast based on *The Devil's Candy*, produced by the Turner Classic Movies

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channel in 2021 and narrated largely by Salamon, including clips from her taped interviews with cast and crew from years ago.

The controlling idea of *The Devil's Candy*, the podcast especially, is to explore why the film failed so remarkably when the novel had been such a hit. Different explanations surface—talk of De Palma compromising the hard edges of Wolfe's work for commercial reasons (he does), and of the affable Hanks not being quite right for the role of the main character, the hot-shot bond trader Sherman McCoy (I can't agree). Sherman is one of the arrogant, entitled '80s era Wall Street "Masters of the Universe" who have everything and expect more

In truth, it's not unusual for hugely successful books to flop as films; not everything turns out like *Gone with the Wind*. In fact, it's a kind of truism that first rate books are often transformed into second rate forgettable films, at best, as, for example, with Hemingway's modernist classic, *The Sun also Rises*, while second rate books can make first rate films, like Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. One can fruitfully speculate as to why that happens, but *Bonfire* had had such broad appeal (fifty-six weeks on the bestseller list), and had been seen as the quintessential summation of 1980s New York City, kind of the way F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* came to emblemize the Prohibition-era "Jazz Age" of the 1920s (another modern literary classic the films of which have generally been judged inadequate). The 1980s was the era of showy vice, of rabid consumption, of "greed is good," when a CEO's much younger second or third "trophy wife" might actually be featured as such on the cover of a glossy business magazine. The stage, or rather the backlot, seemed set for some entertaining explosion of contemporary vanities but the result was underwhelming for critics and audiences.

As most readers probably recall, the main plot concerns the married Sherman and his also married mistress Maria straying into the South Bronx in his Mercedes where they are menaced by two black youths, one of whom is accidentally hit when Maria takes the wheel in panic. This is built into a huge racial incident by the Al Sharpton-like Reverend Bacon, the District Attorney's office, and Peter Fallow, a dissolute tabloid reporter desperate for a scoop, with Sherman becoming a politically useful white male target.

We're certainly not surprised to learn of the Ivy League sociology professor who, Salamon relates in her postscript to the 2021 edition, dares not assign *Bonfire* to classes. Already sensitive in its own time, it positively assaults pieties about race and ethnicity today. But the Tawana Brawley hoax was playing out in real life around the time of the novel and film, in which a black teenager falsely accused four white men of having raped her, an incident fomented into a headline grabbing racial outrage with the help of Al Sharpton; and protests against the Jewish owned Freddie's Fashion Mart in Harlem (marked as "white interlopers" by, again, Al Sharpton), eventuated in the deaths of eight people, including the perpetrator. "Wolfe's book remains controversial," Salamon remarks, "judging from reader comments on Goodreads. People either find it a trenchant social commentary or an insensitive mass of caricatures." In a way it's both. *Bonfire* got away with its objectionable material and broad treatment through rollicking, raucous satire that rings a veritable gong of truth, over the top but quite believable.

The film takes liberties with the book but does present much of its contents, suitably insults just about every group portrayed, and sends up what passes for big city racial-sexual politics late in the twentieth century. The "good Jewish liberal" DA wanting to "nail the Wasp," the lustful gold digger Maria tempting Sherman, the frenzied crowds demanding Sherman's head, the Reverend Bacon using race and religion to cash in, and a masque-of-the-red-death scene as rooms full of glittery frivolous Wasp-y hollow men and women are forced to flee from Sherman's apartment, not in the novel but suggested by it.

But the film grows weak and loses punch, and casting Peter Fallow, the tabloid journalist, as a sympathetic American rather than the boozy grasping Fleet Street-type Brit of the novel is a missed opportunity.

Leaving the movie aside, Salamon's book and podcast offer insight into the world of modern filmmaking, and more specifically, a chance to consider aspects of the representation of offensive, scandalous, scurrilous, sensitive subjects in art, a topic that ignited especially in the twentieth century and continues along different lines into the twenty first, something that figures in the making of the film

even more than in the book itself. After all, there's a big difference between novels read in private and entertainments seen in public. Wolfe's subject matter is pretty raw, and there's plenty of coarse language too, but he is not explicit in describing sex or violence and of course you don't hear the epithets, boorish speech, and four-letter words when you're reading. It's different with film and drama.

Modernism prompted all kinds of experimentation in the arts, both in subject matter and form. In the performing arts it started in underground venues that began to feature nudity, sensuality, perversity, violence, and simulated torture and cruelty. In one play, even the audience members were grabbed by the neck on entry and thrown into their seats. It took some time getting into mainstream entertainment, stage and film, because of various codes—legal, moral, traditional—and those set by the entertainment industries themselves, but took off with the Sixties.

Such experimentation was generally presented as Progress, blessed progress in artistic freedom, in the broadening of freedom of speech, in the furthering of human liberation, in advancing the necessary deeper exploration of the human experience that the culture had grown too rigid to confront. For a time, there may have been some aesthetic justification for some of this, part of an age of exploration of the unconscious Freudian depths beneath the surface of life (evidently even the staid T.S. Eliot defended the erotic novels of D.H. Lawrence, according to Eliot's biographer), or the underlying savagery beneath the civilized veneer, as in Hans Castorp's bloody vision when he ventures out in the snow in *The Magic Mountain*, for example. But gradually over time it just seemed to mean more profanity, lewdness, violence, brutality, and, well, sheer filth, with little or no aesthetic justification whatever.

This spirit of experimentation entered the university as well. Unlike critical race theory and other recent academic trends, these newer artistic directions began in the larger culture, and academia followed on. I reported on some of them in an article in *Academic Questions* (Winter, 1987-8), in which I describe some of the contradictions I observed at the sections on feminism at the Modern Language Association in New York City in 1986:

But the grandest contradiction had a moral component. At a session on women in the avant garde, a journalist/teacher enthusiastically reported on a recent trend. Several women have separately created solo theatrical pieces in which they deliver monologues of extraordinary obscenity and invite the audience to touch and explore their intimate parts. The language the journalist used was so scandalous, the acts she described so humiliating, that the listeners were perceptibly shocked. When it came time for questions, however, there were only a few timidly voiced comments and a feeble conjecture about the propriety of doing this sort of thing for money (presumably the conjecturer was a Marxist). Feminism is about freedom for women, the journalist insisted, and these performers are exercising their freedom as they see fit. But members of a movement dedicated to advancing women's freedom proved unable even to articulate a defense against obscenity when this was presented under the banner of liberation.¹

Skipping ahead some years, Nathan Harden's shocking book *Sex and God at Yale: Porn, Political Correctness, and a Good Education Gone Bad* (2012) exposes the extent to which universities consented to spread sexual "liberation" on campus through regular "Sex Weeks," offering erotic paraphernalia and live demonstrations of sexual practices in front of students and professors in mixed male-female audiences. Further, a Northwestern University professor managed to discomfort his normally politically current college president Morton Schapiro by bringing "sex workers" into his classroom for a live demonstration with a sex toy in front of the students.

And speaking of mixed audiences, coed dorms started to be the standard arrangement in the 80s and 90s, eventually to be followed by coed bathrooms. Wendy Shalit's *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (1999) explained the way seemingly open democratic dorm

1 Carol Iannone, "Feminist Follies," *Academic Questions* (Spring 1988).

discussions about whether to go with mixed bathrooms actually became subtly coercive, as students, girls especially, felt compelled to declare themselves “comfortable with their bodies” to avoid looking like prudes. Tom Wolfe satirized the coed bathroom, amusingly but perhaps at too great length, in *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004).

Be that as it may, breaking boundaries in art and entertainment moved further and further from the ideals of serving honesty and frankness about the human experience to pure shock and sensationalism. For example, the popular cable series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* concerns a young Jewish housewife in the 1950s aspiring to be a standup comic in the manner of Lenny Bruce, who was arrested for his risqué monologues in downtown Manhattan clubs in the 50s and 60s. Part of her schtick is that she is the beautiful and beautifully dressed Mrs. Maisel, bourgeois wife and mother from the Upper West Side. Omniscient in all female concerns, she greatly upgrades a Catholic friend’s parish wedding, and then destroys it with an embarrassingly smutty monologue that the *New Yorker* critic “cheered.”

Plato says we’re affected by watching these things; what about performing them? How do the performers themselves feel about the increasingly coarse, lewd, profane, shocking, violent, prurient things they’re asked to do and say in contemporary plays, movies, and now even on television.

Interesting that in the making of *Bonfire*, as we discover in *The Devil’s Candy*, none of the performers seemed to object to the free flying epithets they had to speak and hear (including the n-word, said by both black and white), and the openly racist attitudes and so-called stereotypes they were supposed to project. But the more specific experiences of the actresses were quite different. (You’re supposed to say actors for both male and female now, but for no good reason that I can discern.)

Melanie Griffith’s character Maria, the lascivious younger wife of a wealthy Jewish businessman, is the “devil’s candy” in the story, so named by the film’s producer. Despite having played free spirited, uninhibited, flamboyant sirens before, Griffith found herself uncomfortable in the role. She wasn’t a single twenty something anymore, she protested to Salamon. She was now thirty-three, a wife and

mother of three children, and her character's aggressively raunchy sex scenes troubled her, as did her foul-mouthed dialogue.

She was especially troubled by one particularly filthy line she was supposed to say, not in the novel. She pleaded with Cristofer and De Palma to change it, and suggested another, vulgar enough, but not so crude, not so gross, she insisted. It's supposed to be crude, it's supposed to be gross, Cristofer retorts, unconcerned, as was De Palma. In order for her to film it, the set had to be cleared of all extraneous personnel. She started at barely a whisper but by the time she was up to nineteen takes, she was pronouncing it gleefully. One winces at learning this; it's like a tutorial in pornography.

Beth Broderick, an actress in a minor part, had a scene in which she pulls off her panties and climbs onto a xerox machine to photocopy her nether parts, copies to be sent as revenge to some enemies. You don't actually see much, thankfully, but she slithers around on the glass surface for a minute or so, totally unnecessary to the import of the scene, which is to impart key information to Peter Fallow, who is doing his best to paw her, and Broderick was mortified at having to do it. Again, the set had to be cleared of unnecessary crew, and Broderick had all to do to keep from crying during the nine hours it took to film the many takes needed to satisfy the director, who was, by the way, dating her at the time of the production. A staff member remarks to Salamon that the scene adds nothing to the plot, is gratuitous and stupidly sensationalistic. Broderick emerges from her ordeal "with bruised buttocks and thighs and feelings of humiliation quite unlike anything she'd experienced before in her professional life." Ironically, and sadly, this was one of two scenes that one of the test audiences liked, while otherwise pretty much disdaining the whole film. Nothing could go more toward showing how not only useless but outright harmful so-called artistic license can be to the larger vision of a work, as Aristotle could have told them.

Of course we have to acknowledge that Griffith took the part, gave herself to the role, collected her pay; Broderick dressed provocatively and sought "sexy" parts, the only parts she felt were available to her. But isn't it ironic that no actress in the bad old patriarchal days of Hollywood would have been asked to do such things for the screen.

Even in the pre-code era, the subject matter may have been more suggestive, but nothing had to be graphically displayed or spoken. Actresses would not be asked to do anything undignified on screen that they would be ashamed of, as they may be today, after decades of feminism and “women’s liberation.” De Palma’s impassively directing girlfriend Broderick’s ordeal brought to mind the scene in the musical *Pal Joey* (1957), movie version, in which Frank Sinatra as the main character, supposedly a kind of “heel,” nevertheless can’t abide seeing his girlfriend perform a striptease, stops the music, and tells her to get dressed.

All the cultural protections for women were dismissed at the insistence of feminists, and only legalism and me too activism and such is left to try to restore, as much for vengeance as for lost dignity. True, there was a feminist faction that opposed pornography, but in general contemporary feminism has identified sexual liberation as part of women’s liberation.

Interestingly, some of the actors who appeared in “groundbreaking” films have been bringing chickens home to roost. French actress Maria Schneider who starred with Marlon Brando in the 1972 *Last Tango in Paris*, one of the scandalous films of the countercultural years that nevertheless had mainstream distribution. Nineteen years old at the time, she protested that she was directed to act in a simulated but graphic anal rape scene about which she had not been informed and which wasn’t in the script, and criminal proceedings were brought against the director Bernardo Bertolucci. He served a suspended four month prison sentence and the film was made unavailable for some years. He later pleaded a form of aesthetic license; he wanted her reactions to be authentic. Schneider, who passed away in 2011 at age 58, claimed that the experience blighted her life and her career.

Very recently, in January of 2023, the actors who portrayed the principals in Franco Zeffereilli’s innovative *Romeo and Juliet* in 1968, Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey, have brought a half billion-dollar lawsuit against Paramount because the studio allowed Zeffereilli to film them in the nude, and without their knowledge, when they were minors, fifteen and sixteen years old at the time. Like Schneider, the two British actors claim that the experience caused emotional

damage that did not allow them to benefit from the film's huge success. Zefferelli's defenders insist that the scene is aesthetically justified, mixing up the categories of culpability.

Meanwhile, comedy grows more dicey, cable television permits graphic violence and outright pornography (perhaps thought to be needed to hold audience interest in interminable multi-episode, multi-year shows while the writers figure out the plot), one hears four letter words in podcasts and even on radio, and artistic corruption continues to be widespread and barely noticed. Maybe it's time to break the boundaries in the opposite direction. After all, there are real people involved, both in the audience and on stage and screen.