

What Happens Next – Sunday March 7, 2021

Thomas Edison, MeToo, Bonfire of the Vanities, and Consumer Behavior

Julie Salamon and David Grazian QA

Larry Bernstein:

All right before we get to question answers, we're going to have you joined by a panelist, Julie Salamon, the former Wall Street Journal and New York Times film and TV critic. She will discuss aspects of her book, *The Devil's Candy*, the Anatomy of a Hollywood Fiasco, the Making of the Film *Bonfire of the vanities*. Julie, go ahead.

Julie Salamon:

Thanks so much, Larry. Larry's invitation to be part of this discussion came at the perfect moment. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the publication of *The Devil's Candy*, the book I wrote about Brian De Palma's adaptation of *Bonfire of the Vanities*. I was a film critic at the Wall Street Journal at that time and De Palma, who had gotten to know in the course of doing articles about Hollywood, gave me complete access to filming from start to finish. My book came out a year after the movie did. It was an amazing experience for me and not so amazing for the filmmakers because nobody's been allowed to do it since then.

While Tom Wolfe's book became a symbol of everything that was wrong with New York in the 1980s, Brian De Palma's movie became a symbol of everything that was wrong with Hollywood filmmaking as the 1990s began. *Bonfire*, the movie was lacerated by critics. And my book did really well, no doubt in part because *Bonfire* was such a huge publicized so-called failure. In *Newsweek*, the critics said the promise misfortune is Salamon's gain. It didn't make me feel very good about somebody who had been so generous to me.

So people always ask me when I knew that the movie was awful. And I always say I never did. For me, when I watched the movie, I didn't really see a movie, I saw the making of each scene. And the truth is, to prepare for today, I watched the movie again. And honestly, I think it's a movie worth reconsidering. It may not be a great film, but it's certainly an interesting film and a worthy artifact.

The truth is, interest in both the film and Tom Wolfe's book remain strong. A new audio version of my book, *The Devil's Candy* is coming out this summer and I've been asked to do a seven-part podcast about the making of the movie right now. Sort of very meta, the movie about a book and then a podcast about the book about the making of the movie about the book. Very 21st century.

So I've been thinking about Bonfire a lot. And I am amazed at how Tom Wolfe's observation to the world he was living in were so prescient. As David pointed out, it's true that much in New York, where I live, has changed for the better. But so much is the same. Wolfe wrote about the masters of the universe, the mainly men on Wall Street, who we would now refer to as the 1%. The tabloid press that will satirize has been replaced by Twitter. But the net effect is the same, only worse. And Wolfe's take on race certainly heralded the Black Lives Matter movement, as did his cynical or accurate take down on New York politicians, Bill DeBlasio, Andrew Cuomo, need I say more.

In the course of writing my book, I had the good fortune to spend several hours interviewing Tom Wolfe on two separate occasions. His prose was lacerating, but he himself was a courtly, Southern gentlemen. Bonfire was wildly popular, Wolfe got plenty of criticism for being sexist, racist, ultra conservative. I would argue that he was a great reporter, even when writing a novel and a good social critic, demonizing just about everyone in the cause of making people think about the world we live in. He wasn't presenting his characters to praise them, but rather to skewer the real-life people they represented.

The filmmakers on the other hand, lost heart about two seconds after they bought the rights to Wolfe's book. I'm not sure the term politically correct had been invented yet, but that's what the movie suffered from at the time. Especially when it came to casting. David has laid out the plot, so you kind of know the characters. Sherman McCoy, the master of the universe, was deemed too unlikable by the Hollywood execs. So, they gave the role to Tom Hanks, just off his success in Big. Remember how adorable he was? The grown man in a 12-year-old boy's body? Wolfe's dissipated British journalist, Peter Fallow, became Bruce Willis, hot off of Diehard. And look, who's talking. Remember he played a baby in utero and then after birth?

But the biggest change within Wolfe's sole noble character Judge Kavitsky, the Jewish judge who sticks to the law. Alan Arkin was supposed to play him, but all of a sudden the executives and De Palma had a flash. By then, they had turned all the white men male main characters into these guys who were sort of nice and likable. But all the blacks of the movies were caricatures. So, they decided Judge Kavitsky should be black. And not just black. He'd be played by Morgan Freeman.

For Tom Wolfe, this casting cut the guts out of his story. I remember talking with him about what he called the crossover point politically. He meant that the moment he arrived where new groups were coming into their own politically, the same way that it had happened in previous generations for Italians, Irish, and Jews. Now Latinx and blacks were becoming dominant

populations, but the ruling political class at the time hadn't made the shift. Judge Kavitsky had to be who he was to make that point, to illustrate the tension that existed every day as black defendants faced white judges and prosecutors. I wish I could say Bonfire was entirely a history lesson, but it certainly is not.

As I said at the beginning, the issues Wolfe wrote about are far from settled. In my non-work life, I'm board chair of BRC, one of the city's largest provider of social services and shelter to people who don't have homes. I started volunteering at BRC 30 years ago, right about the same time I started reporting *The Devil's Candy*. At that time, you may remember the city was overwhelmed by homeless people, and we still have an enormous homeless population. So those issues that Tom Wolfe was writing about, the issues that drove people out of their homes and into the streets haven't been resolved.

Julie Salamon:

As for *The Devil's Candy*, Tom Wolfe recognized it would be difficult, maybe impossible, to condense his huge book into a two-hour movie. He told me then it's too bad movies don't run nine or 10 hours. Though he spent the last part of his career as a novelist, Tom Wolfe remained at heart, a journalist. He wanted us to look at the world around us and say what? Really? I really believe Bonfire has important things to say. Maybe we should have listened more closely last time around. And I think you should watch the movie. It gets four stars on Rotten Tomatoes.

Larry Bernstein:

Julie, thank you. I'm going to open with a question for you and then go to David in a second. First, the point you make is that the producers got cold feet regarding Judge Kavitsky's character by bringing in Morgan Freeman to play his role. Do you think that we've got producers are even more politically correct now? And could a film like this even be made today? To its vision?

Julie Salamon:

No. Interestingly enough, I was thinking about Tom Wolfe saying that the book should have been nine or 10 hours. I think it probably could be made today as a mini-series or a limited run series. And in fact, there were news reports about five or six years ago that Amazon had bought the... was thinking about buying the rights to the book or had bought the rights to the book and were thinking of doing that. But nothing's ever happened. If you look at things like succession, I think that we probably could do a, probably not as a two-hour movie, but as a longer form piece.

Larry Bernstein:

Yeah. Another thing about the book is I thought of it as a tragedy. And Sherman McCoy, although not a lovable character, we really understand him and feel his pain. And we cringed as all these problems are moving towards the center stage. When they chose Tom Hanks to play him, did they effectively give up on the tragedy? Did they not make him a real enough character that was worthy of that type of empathy? How do you think about why Tom Hanks didn't work in the role?

Julie Salamon:

No, I mean, I actually think they chose Tom Hanks exactly for that reason. And just to go back to the whole question of whether he did or didn't work in the role, I think one of the things that happened to Bonfire, which, as I said, I think if you watch the movie to date, it's pretty entertaining. But I think when the movie came out, the people who reviewed the movie were critics like me. Except I didn't, because I'd spent the year following it around. But critics had all read the book.

So when they reviewed the movie, I think the backlash was not against the movie that was in front of them, but the movie they had inside their heads because they had such strong feelings about Tom Wolfe's book. So no, Tom Hanks wouldn't be the person you would cast in that role. But if you hadn't read the book and you saw Tom Hanks and Sherman McCoy, I think he did exactly what you're talking about, Larry. He like you see the more sympathetic side of Sherman.

Larry Bernstein:

Another example, which you talk about in your book, is the role of the mistress, Maria Ruskin, Tom Hanks's love interest. In the book, you mentioned interviewing Uma Thurman as a potential role at the time a 19-year-old aspiring actress. And when there's the meeting you described between Tom Hanks and Brian De Palma, Tom Hanks basically says I didn't feel any sexual tension or that actress won't work with me. And Brian De Palma is stunned by it. And instead, they go with Melanie Griffith.

When I watch the movie now and I see Melanie Griffith in the role, I think she kills it. And I actually can't see Uma Thurman doing it right. In retrospect, how do you think about the decision to go with Melanie Griffith over Uma Thurman in that role?

Julie Salamon:

Oh, I think it was the right decision. I think Melanie was great. I mean, for me, part of what was just fascinating about the whole Uma Thurman thing was that a lot of the duplicity and craziness that Tom Wolfe wrote about in terms of people's relationships in their families or in their job played out on the movie set. So, they had already been in negotiations with Melanie

Griffith to play this role that when they auditioned Uma because on the spread of the moment, the promise that she might do a better job.

Julie Salamon:

Interestingly, thinking about what Christine was talking about earlier about harassment of women, when I look back at the way women were treated on that set, I mean, there were hardly any. But it was really a reminder of how much things have changed. Even though interestingly, the executive in charge of the production, Lucy Fisher, was a woman. On the other hand, Melanie Griffith, who was one of the three stars of the movie got paid less than 30% of what both Bruce Willis and Tom Hanks got paid.

Larry Bernstein:

David, to bring you into the conversation, the first question I asked Julie was could they make this movie today? Let me ask a more basic question to you. Can you teach *Bonfire of the Vanities* in a class at Penn, in a world where they're taking Dr. Seuss off the shelves?

David Grazian:

I don't think so. I mean the truth is, for all of Tom Wolfe's talents, he's never really portrayed African-American characters all that well. I mean, you see this in some of his earlier work as well. Like in *Radical Chic*. The book is a sprawling novel, almost 700 pages. There's not a single relatable female character. And it's about a New York City that again, that doesn't entirely exist anymore. Whereas if we had an updated version of this kind of a book about sort of about the city as it exists today, I think it could be taught very well in schools.

I mean, so one example of this, and so if we can shift media, in the urban studies program at Penn, we have a course on the city. And the primary text for that course is the five-season run of the show, *The Wire*, which takes place in Baltimore. And like Tom Wolfe's novel, is sort of the sprawling depiction of the city with lots and lots of interlocking characters. And there's an entire season devoted to corruption in politics, there's an entire season devoted to corruption in journalism. In a lot of ways, *The Wire* captures all of the sort of the trickery surrounding race relations and racial politics in a city like Baltimore. In a lot of ways, *The Wire* works perfectly as sort of a text for a class like that, in a way that *Bonfire of the Vanities* just sort of seems kind of dated and out of touch.

Larry Bernstein:

I love *The Wire* as well, and I think it's a great example. Could you also speak a little bit about

the role and use of literature and film in sociology, as a way of going behind the scenes to understand the complexities of social life?

David Grazian:

Sure. So, this was something that was actually much more popular in the 1950s and 1960s, I think in part because sociologists were more considered public intellectuals in midcentury America than they are today. And scholars like C. Wright Mills and Erving Goffman, David Riesman wrote books that were best-sellers, that were going to be read by large swaths of the population. These were real sort of intellectual figures that both relied on film and novels for examples that they could pull from fiction, to sort of illuminate the things that we observe in everyday life. And in a lot of ways, Tom Wolfe's writing, particularly his nonfiction, given that he relies so much on reportage, and then brings that report Bonfire of the Vanities... In a lot of ways, Bonfire of the Vanities feels like a work of sociology because he's able to take his reporting and his observations about everyday life, and infuse his books with that sort of every day kind of authenticity.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's go back to your comparison with *The Wire*, which I just loved. In *The Wire*, there is season on the Baltimore Sun, going in depth into the media. And in *Bonfire*, the media plays a very important role as well, and how Reverend Bacon was very successful in using the press, making that relationship with Peter Fallon, to kind of bring this McCoy story to a frenzy. And he also makes fun of how TV works, how the demonstrations were made for TV, and how to use the press to their benefit.

I guess a two-part question. Was Wolfe successful in the dramatization of the role of the media, and has the media radically changed since the mid-eighties when he wrote this, in terms of their presence and power?

David Grazian:

So the first question is I do think he does a really great job of depicting the media forces at play in the 1980s, particularly surrounding New York politics. As I said, my front row seat to New York culture and politics was all through television, having grown up in the New York suburbs and watching local news coverage of this. On the other hand, in a lot of ways, a lot of the points that he makes, we kind of take for granted, right? We kind of were familiar with the idea that public demonstrations are very often what Daniel Burstein, the historian, referred to as pseudo-events, that are events that are simply put on for the purpose of being reported on.

I think, as Julie pointed out, if you were to do something like this today, there would be a whole lot of talk about social media and mobilizing bots to create disinformation campaigns. I think the media landscape that we have is far more technologically sophisticated than back then. And I think because we all use social media, we're all extraordinarily familiar with the ways in which the media can be manipulated to the ends that were used by Reverend Bacon in Bonfire.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to go to a Black Lives Matter for a second. What's really interesting about Bonfire is it kind of turned Black Lives Matter 180 degrees. Here, in the set, in the current world, the police and the district attorneys are viewed as antagonists to the African-American community. And in this book, both the police and the District Attorney's Office believe that what they really want is the Great White Defendant. They want to take down someone who looks like Sherman McCoy, and they can't believe their good luck. He comes right out of central casting as the man to take down.

How would you distinguish between the desire to destroy the Great White Defendant and Black Lives Matter's fears that these same organizations are being primarily used to take down the African-American community?

David Grazian:

Well, to me, I would say that the desire to take down the Great White Defendant is sort of an exception that proves the rule. The reason they need to take down Sherman McCoy... I almost said Tom Hanks. The reason they had to take down Sherman McCoy is to cover up all of the everyday systematic racism that the criminal justice system inflicts on Latino and black populations on a daily basis. And it becomes very clear that, in terms of the politics of the moment, Sherman McCoy becomes a useful scapegoat in politically sort of volatile climate. But it's fairly clear that Wolfe does see this as a corrupt systematically racist system that sort of is a need of a scapegoat for its own survival.

Larry Bernstein:

Julie, to bring you back in, you start out your discussion by mentioning that it's been 30 years since the film and 30 years since you've written your book. I read Bonfire in 1987 when it was first released, and I had just started work at Salomon Brothers at the time, as a 21-year-old financial analyst. And I read the book with agape, in complete shock as to these characters in these unknown worlds, which, frankly, I had yet to be exposed to. The only part of the book that I had any experience with was ironically Pierce & Pierce, which was based on the trading floor that I was working on at Salomon Brothers, which was uncannily accurate. I didn't know

any social x-rays, I had never been to an Upper East Side dinner party. But now that I'm 54 and I've had a chance to go to these dinner parties, I now know that he was completely accurate and a very good social critic and observer.

And I'm just wondering, as a film critic now coming at reviewing this movie with 30 years more of age, how do you see how accurate the book was, and how the film could expose some of this interesting satire?

Julie Salamon:

So, as I said before, I think the movie is interesting. It's an interesting artifact of the time, but also just an interesting film. And I do have to say I'm sad to hear David say that you think that you couldn't teach *Bonfire of the Vanities* in a classroom, because it seems like yes, certainly parts of it are dated, but I think to talk about how somebody, who was an incredible journalist writing at that time, would talk about the social issues in this satiric vein, it feels sort of very sad to me, as a liberal arts person, to think that you couldn't have that discussion.

In terms of the movie, I think that it's an odd movie because De Palma is so much a visual stylist and Tom Wolfe is a word man, so Tom Wolfe painted every single picture with words, and De Palma tried to match that with his visual style. So sometimes the movie's just a little bit jarring with all these weird camera, angles and exaggerations, but I think that it really holds up as a satire, and it seems so much smarter than so many movies I see today.

Larry Bernstein:

David, you mentioned that you thought Tom Wolfe did a poor job with some of the African-American characters, but the lead African-American character in this book is Reverend Bacon. And, for me, Bacon is a very complicated character. On the one hand he plays this black organizer, but behind the scenes he's also running a municipal bond underwriting business, he has some insurance businesses, he seems to be very familiar with all the upscale New York restaurants, and he also seems to manipulate the press. He seems like an incredible giant. Why do you feel that when he creates characters like Bacon, it does not work?

David Grazian:

A lot of it is the way that he describes black English vernacular. A lot of this comes through in the very first scene in the novel, which is a jarring way to start the book. This is essentially a demonstration that erupts during a political speech. The other thing I'll say about... First of all, if a faculty member in urban studies wanted to teach this at Penn, I certainly wouldn't stop them. I just simply wouldn't teach it myself. It's not really where my students are at either, they're really looking for a more diverse wide variety of voices that speak to them, and I just don't see

this as the kind of book that speaks to the millennial generation of today's college students. Particularly given how many of those students have been moved by the Black Lives Matter social movement.

Larry Bernstein:

David, just going back to *Radical Chic* for a second, which was one of Tom Wolfe's first books. And it describes a cocktail party at a Park Avenue apartment where the Black Panthers are invited. And some wealthy Jewish guys are at an apartment and talking with them, and the Black Panther activist is asked, "What's your plans?" and he says, "Our next step is to kind of burn down these buildings here on Park." And the fellow says, "Like which building, because I live on Park." And it's very funny. He's very clever in kind of bringing to a head when people's interests are not on the same page, and them not realizing at the same time. So, in some ways he's an artist, he's clever, he's not that serious.

David Grazian:

That's right. Part of the challenge, though, for him... So, when I think about his first book, or rather his first full length nonfiction novel, *The Electrical Kool-Aid Acid Test*, that's a book that really makes you feel as though you are there. And Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters really felt like, even though he had only spent a couple of weeks with them, he had really sort of gotten their argot, their ways of talking, their lifestyle. They really felt like he had sort of nailed it, and I guess I just don't see... It's just hard to imagine black readers seeing themselves in Tom Wolfe's writing.

Larry Bernstein:

Tom Wolfe goes after the Jews as well. He is relentless on Abe Weiss and Larry Kramer, he's relentless on Judge Kovitsky. It's incredible the venom that comes out, but I don't think Jews feel the same way about it. Just to go in a different direction for a second... One of Wolfe's first books is a book called *New Journalism*, which is an edited collection of articles, kind of reinvigorating what journalism is. He takes Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, and starts talking about giving the journalists license to be creative and comment about what's going on in people's minds, where, in fact, journalists have really no idea. In other words, he's using the ideas of literature and applying it to journalism.

And I think what's fascinating about *Bonfire* is he's able to take the ideas of journalism and use them back into literature, kind of reversing his first great adventure.

David Grazian:

I think that's right. And for me, as a sociologist, a lot of the writing that made me want to become a sociologist was that sort of creative non-fiction new journalism of the '60s period, including *The Electrical Kool-Aid Acid Test*. In a lot of ways, what he is doing is he's infusing sort of sociological ethnography with art, and I think it's something I wish sociologists were trained to do better, and I wish it was something that sociologists wanted to do better. We might be more a part of the public conversation if we did.

And I agree, I think Tom Wolfe does an equally good job of taking his reportage and pouring it into his novels, much in the way that realists like Emile Zola did at the turn of the century.

Larry Bernstein:

One of my favorite characters in the novel is a real estate broker, who we first meet at that dinner party where Sharon McCoy is sitting next to Maria Ruskin. And it seems innocuous at the time, she plays very little interest, but she is one of the first phone calls when Sherman gets into trouble and says, "By the way-"

David Grazian:

She wants to help him sell his apartment, right?

Larry Bernstein:

Yeah, and he can't believe her audacity, how the vultures are circling so quickly. I thought it was just incredibly insightful, and Tom Wolfe was fantastic.

Larry Bernstein:

Julie, question for you. You mentioned that you had unfettered access to making this book about the movie, but that, since then, no one has allowed a journalist to do that again. Why did you burn so many bridges for so many of your colleagues? And how?

Julie Salamon:

Well, I didn't think I was burning so many bridges, I really just wrote a book that reported what I saw. But it was, I think, in retrospect, I think by De Palma allowing me on a film set, it was really like inviting somebody into the inner sanctum of your family, and letting somebody write down every grotesque thing you say and do to each other, and the absurdity that comes up that usually is not part of the press.

But also, I think what I tried to do in the book was just to show the aspect of the work, most of which is incredibly unglamorous, but a lot of it was inadvertently funny and crazy, like any workplace. And I think the reason nobody ever let a journalist... I probably wouldn't have been let on either, except De Palma just let me and the first part of filming took place in New York

and by the time the film moved out to LA, I was so embedded that the studio had no choice. They just didn't want the truth to be told, even though the truth, in my opinion, is not bad damning, it's just interesting.

Larry Bernstein:

I agree. And was Brian upset by the book, at the end of the day, and if so, what bothered him? Was it his personal relations with his various levers that was the problem, or was it something about his professional work?

Julie Salamon:

Neither. Brian De Palma has been unbelievable about this book from the get-go, even after the movie bombed and he could have closed the door on me, because I still needed to talk to him. Because the movie was out and over and I was just starting to write my book, and he never flinched. He went into kind of hibernation for a few weeks after the movie was just so destroyed by the press, but then he continued to talk to me. After the book came out, he has spoken of it in very positive terms on the Charlie Rose Show, and there was a documentary that came out about De Palma five years ago. So, he felt that it was accurate, and he stood by his decision to let me in, basically.

Larry Bernstein:

One last question. When your book ends, it sort of ends with it doing very poorly at the box office. And poorly met, it had revenues around 15 million, out of a budget of around 40 or something and so it was a money loser. But when the producers, when Warner Brothers or when Ms. Fisher was analyzing it before it got to the theater, she thought it was a masterpiece and had the potential for greatness. Do you know, did they ever have a post-mortem to evaluate what went wrong, and what they missed that the public didn't like?

Julie Salamon:

Yes, and I think what they concluded, and I think they were right, is that they completely underestimated the power of the critics at that point. It's really different now... A movie comes out, and individual critics at newspapers, on TV, really don't matter that much because people look online, they can get many more voices weighing in on a movie. But 30 years ago, the critical establishment were made up primarily of people who were fans of Tom Wolfe's book. He was a fellow journalist who had written this novel that had become sort of lauded as this brilliant takedown, which it was, of the 1980s, and people were... They really looked at the movie as though it was a personal affront to them. I have rarely seen so many really terrible reviews.

Larry Bernstein:

Unbelievable. All right, David and Julie, thank you.