

**Martin Smollich**

# Tom Wolfe's "The Bonfire of the Vanities" as a Stylistic Triumph

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## I. Introduction

“I’m not talking about zeitgeist now, or spiritual matters or other things people tend to talk about when they are talking about literary matters . . . . To me, it was always the technique that was important.”<sup>1</sup>

(Conversations with Tom Wolfe, 1990)

Since the beginning of his success as a creative force within the New Journalism movement in the late 1960s, Tom Wolfe has established himself as a major figure of American Letters. Born on March 2, 1931 in Richmond, Virginia, the son of an agronomy professor and a landscape designer discovered his enthusiasm for fiction and journalism even before high school and majored in English at Washington and Lee in 1951. Instead of further pursuing his studies or applying as a journalist, he decided to pursue a professional career in baseball. Playing in a semi-professional league for one year, the twenty-year-old Virginian nourished dreams of earning his living as an athlete. When the New York Giants refused him after three days of tryouts, he enrolled in Yale University’s American Studies doctoral program. Wolfe received his PhD in 1957, but instead of accepting a teaching job in academia, he started working as a journalist right away, following in the footsteps of his idols Mark Twain, Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway. First employments led him to Washington and, as a correspondent for the Washington Post, to Cuba, where he covered the revolution in 1959. Starting at the bottom of the trade, Wolfe had already earned his spurs after four years and landed a job at the New York Herald Tribune in 1962. His editor Clay Felker recognized and encouraged the young reporter’s increasingly idiosyncratic techniques and kept him busy with creative assignments on diverse subjects.<sup>2</sup>

While writing for magazines such as *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone* and the *New York Magazine*, Wolfe found a whole new, unique approach to the popular form of the feature story. Using techniques usually reserved for fiction, he was among the first to question and consequently expand the boundaries of traditional journalism. His most prominent feature stories were usually concerned with novel phenomena of popular culture such as drag racing, life in Las Vegas, or the work of record producer Phil Spector and entertained a growing readership with lively, often flashy language and a vast amount of well-researched

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<sup>1</sup> Scura 1990, 232-233.

<sup>2</sup> McEneaney 2009, 1-9.

details and facts. A collection of his best essays was published with the title *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* in 1965 and was embraced by readers and critics alike. Throughout the following two decades Wolfe built on his success by writing feature stories and publishing several extensive non-fiction books. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) chronicles the psychedelic experiments of Ken Kesey and his “Merry Pranksters”, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (1970) is concerned with Leonard Bernstein’s dinner party for the Black Panthers and San Francisco’s poverty program. From 1973 to 1979 Wolfe did unprecedented research on the Mercury Space program, culminating in the four hundred pages of the critically acclaimed *The Right Stuff* (1979). Besides compiling several collections of his essays, he found the time to write two books criticizing modern art and architecture, *The Painted Word* (1975) and *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981). While usually a commercial success, his works have always had the potential to divide critics and spawn controversial debate. For the most part, Wolfe has appeared unaffected by these outside opinions concerning his work. It was an exception, when he responded to Mailer, Updike and Irving who had found fault with his writing. He continues to investigate whatever subject matter rouses his curiosity and has not wavered from his provocative signature writing style.

The commercial and critical success and popularity of his ever growing non-fiction pieces led to a gradual transition from pure journalism to his first, all fictional novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* in 1987. As of today Wolfe has completed four novels and his reputation as a novelist overshadows his past achievements as a non-fiction journalist and writer of feature stories. *A Man in Full* (1998) is a portrait of Atlanta and the real estate boom in the nineteen- nineties, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004) exposes the decaying values of higher education in America and *Back to Blood* (2012) depicts the life of Cuban immigrants in Miami.

Most of what has been written about Tom Wolfe within the academic world focuses on the early journalistic period of his life and his embracing of non-fiction techniques while the discussion of his stature as a novelist and of his style remains meager.

Chapter 1.2.1. of this study contains a short discussion of several important American novelists beginning with Washington Irving. Besides my intention to sketch a chronological development, I have also included these examples to illustrate the individuality of style. As a concept, however, style is not easily defined. Strunk even argues that there is no satisfactory explanation of style at all. It is always present as soon as we read a written text and it is more than just the sum of simple technicalities. It is hard to



define what makes a certain combination of words effective while other combinations do not stimulate the reader's mind to the same extent. In its broader meaning style is "what is distinguished and distinguishing"<sup>3</sup>, or as Palmer puts it, "not unlike genius: we reckon to know it when we see it, but find it hard to define."<sup>4</sup>

Applying Link's definition<sup>5</sup>, I understand the term style as the individual characteristics of language. The individuality of language is provoked by the object it tries to express. Success or failure of individual style depends on whether the language chosen is the language best suited to describe its object. Blankenship adds the dimension of variability and free choice, "the variable features, particularly those habitually chosen by an encoder, may be termed the style of the individual"<sup>6</sup>.

I will focus on the *The Bonfire of the Vanities* because it is arguably his most fully realized novel, bringing together meticulously researched facts about New York City society in the late 1980s, a well structured, surprising plot and a Dickensian array of compelling characters all tinted in effective, biting satire. It also stands as his most successful novel in terms of its critical and commercial success to date, unsurpassed by his following three attempts at the genre, each of which sold fewer copies than its predecessor. While the book has been repeatedly explained in terms of its cultural references, a true examination of *Bonfire* as a stylistic endeavor is yet missing. Considering how unique, attention-grabbing and loud Wolfe's style presents itself, this comes rather as a surprise.

The study contains a close reading analysis of five chapters showcasing various stylistic traits. Wolfe himself has pointed out the four stylistic devices, which he regards as indispensable in creating gripping, expressive and realistic prose. These include the third-person point of view, scene-by-scene construction, extensive dialogue, and the recording of status-life symbols<sup>7</sup>. Due to Wolfe's consistent use of these devices in his groundbreaking feature stories, they are now associated with the mechanisms of the New Journalism in general. And while their merit in this medium is widely accepted, it remains disputed whether they have enabled Wolfe to write novels that match the quality of his earlier magazine pieces. This study will examine whether Wolfe's style, largely determined by these four devices, can function in the format of the novel. In order to determine this, the novel's intentions have to be identified. I claim that *Bonfire's* ambitions

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<sup>3</sup> Strunk 1959, 66.

<sup>4</sup> Palmer 1993, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Link 1970, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Blankenship 1974, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfe 1973/ 31-32.