

Designer Selves in Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and Danielle Steel's *Crossings*

Hildegard Hoeller

Both Tom Wolfe in his realist novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and Danielle Steel in her sentimental novel *Crossings* use designer and brand names as narrative tools. While such a use of designer names enhances the verisimilitude of the novels, it also involves both authors in complex, post-modern revisions of the nineteenth century literary traditions — realism and sentimental fiction — they place themselves in.

The only reality required by popular fiction is that the description of luxury goods with brand-names be precisely rendered.

Gore Vidal, *Screening History*¹

Although one is a sentimental and the other a realist narrative, both Danielle Steel's *Crossings* and Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* depict a reality in which commodities and their brand-names are "precisely rendered." Indeed, in these bestselling novels about upper class urban America, a "precise rendition" is not the only purpose designer names serve. Instead, they become the "only reality" these novels describe. Douglas Foley explains that in late capitalist societies

the market produces a barrage of commodities that people use to mark the boundaries between them. The expression of self through consumption becomes the central cultural practice of a capitalist society. (169)

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Steel and Wolfe use designer and brand names as descriptive tools — as markers, signs. Their characters are branded, designed, marked from the outside; they even literally carry or wear their own markers — the Cartier watch, the A&P shopping bag, the Chanel suit, the Chanel-type suit. That is, both narratives participate in a complicated symbol system of class affiliation, “an overly administered world of manufactured symbols and identities” (Foley 186), in which brand-names and designer products become the “reality” of their characters and readers. Although both writers originally used brand and designer names in their fiction to achieve a form of verisimilitude, both Wolfe and Steel end up substantially revising the nineteenth century genres they place themselves in — the realist and the sentimental tradition — through their use of designer names. The use of designer and brandnames commits both writers to a world of signs — a post-modern world in which important premises of both literary traditions need to be revised or even abandoned.

To Steel, verisimilitude is important in order not to disturb the identification and sympathy readers should feel when reading her book. That is, this form of realism is necessary to create the sentimental sympathy her novels demand from the reader. Journalist Patty Everett reports that Danielle Steel begins the creation of her novels “with a long, chapter by chapter synopsis that includes a description of the characters, setting and plot” (1). Then a copy is sent to her research assistant Nancy Eisenbarth to “fill in the blanks” in order to “help paint a historically accurate setting” (1). As examples Eisenbarth cites “blanks for the name of a fragrance a female character dabbed behind her ear” or “a blank for the make of motor car in the hold of the Titanic” (1). That is, brand and designer names appear to be researched just as any other “information” in the process of Steel’s fiction writing. Eisenbarth explains that Steel insists on such verisimilitude: “If you say the wrong thing and somebody who is reading the book knows it, it kind of spoils it for them,” she says. “Danielle likes to have all those kinds of things accurate” (1). That is, Steel insists on “all these real things” in order to create the perfect illusion for her reader.

Tom Wolfe accounts for his use of designer names in a realist, even journalistic, fashion. For example, in his literary manifesto “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast,” he specifically recounts the

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incident which made him include the A&P bag his character Kramer carries:

One evening I looked across the car [in the subway in the Bronx] and saw someone I knew sitting there in a strange rig. He was a Wall Street broker I hadn't seen for nine or ten years. He was dressed in a business suit, but his pants legs were rolled up three or four hitches, revealing a pair of olive green army surplus socks, two bony lengths of shin, and some decomposing striped orthotic running shoes. On the floor between his feet was an A&P shopping bag made of slippery white polyethylene.... He had taken to traveling to and from Wall Street in this pathetic disguise in order to avoid looking worth robbing. In the A&P shopping bag he carried his Wall Street shoes and socks. 53

Wolfe claims that he had planned for Kramer to be robbed in an installment a year later, when the Goetz case happened and he abandoned his plan because he feared that people would say: "This poor fellow Wolfe, he has no imagination. He reads the newspapers, gets these obvious ideas, and then gives us this wimp Kramer, who caves in" (54). Not willing to match reality but also not willing to differ from it in a disappointing way, Wolfe abandons his plot. Kramer carries his leather shoes in the A&P bag, but nothing happens. Wolfe comments: "The *Rolling Stone's* readers' burning thirst, if any, to know what accounted for Assistant D.A. Kramer's pitiful costume...was never slaked" (54).

Wolfe is right to doubt that readers would have a "burning thirst" to know "what accounted for" the A&P bag. Few readers will expect the bag to have the stringent function of an accessory in a murder mystery. Instead, we read the bag as a "sign" of Kramer's cheapness, his class as he himself sees it. Kramer buys groceries, not designer suits. He does not wear an "attache case that comes from Mädler or T. Anthony on Park Avenue and [has] a buttery smoothness that announces: 'I cost \$500,'" (36) like his old law school friend whom he avoids precisely because he owns and carries such a briefcase. Just like the sneakers he sees people wearing in the D-train "were like a sign around the neck reading SLUM or EL BARRIO," (37) so Kramer's A&P bag is a sign designating his much too small rent-controlled apartment in the West Seventies (31). The A&P bag comes to signify everything Kramer's character

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is: his sense of inadequacy, his dissatisfaction with his own lifestyle and the consequent need for disguise, his cheapness. There is no need for a plot-resolution to explain the "prop." It is one sign in a barrage of signs, and we, as readers, read it as marking Kramer's character. In both narratives, designer names do not just fill in blanks or are not just the result of the observations of a "new journalist" or realist. They become a form of telling rather than showing; they replace adjectives, manners, even dialogue.

Steel's narrative — which only deals with "masters of the universe" and not with Bronx assistant D.A.'s or Bronx kids — works visually; reading her novels, we gaze at the characters from the outside. Her narrative technique is gestural; it works in quick flashes like an advertisement on TV. Designer names paint the desirable picture for the reader, even overdetermine it.

Steel's heroine is characteristically "incredibly" affluent, beautiful, and good. These qualities, synonymous in the flat, glossy surface of Steel's book, are partly expressed through designer names. And like advertisements they are not developed but repeated. The affluent characters' glamour is created in quick strokes: "Ten Minutes?" He looked at his watch, a handsome piece of black enamel and gold from Cartier" (98). When the young attractive steel magnate Nick Burnham looks at his watch to make an appointment with the beautiful, rich heroine Liane, Steel's casual mention of his Cartier watch reinforces our sense of the desirability of these characters. Image becomes more important than plot. For a moment, the plot is frozen and we imagine the Cartier watch shining at us as in an advertisement.

Throughout her narrative Steel adds the designer touch even to otherwise negligible moments in the narrative: "As she sat down on the couch in a beige wool suit from Chanel, a steward rang the bell and handled her note" (85). The mention of the beige Chanel suit makes this scene into a pleasurable gaze. Liane, the heroine of Steel's tale, is desirable in this moment. Her class and character are marked by her clothes; she is a "mistress of the universe." Nobody but ourselves is gazing at her. She is unaware of her suit, and the suit is unimportant to the scene; but it is important to us. It reminds us again of Liane's desirability, her superiority. Steel's narrative techniques rely on the readers' expertise in reading advertisements

and their knowledge of designers' names and the social boundaries they describe or promise. If we care about Cartier watches or Chanel suits, as well as Limoges porcelain or Dom Perignon champagne, we will find satisfaction in watching Steels' characters as they live in and are "designed" by these items.

In these scenes, designer names do not function to "fill in blanks" and to give the plot more verisimilitude. Instead, they alter the reading of the book by almost substituting plot. They work against the linear narrative by freezing the progress of the plot in order to provide a moment of pleasure identical to the pleasure we feel when we see an advertisement. E. Ann Kaplan argues with Baudrillard that in the post-modern consciousness

all we have are "simulations," there being no "real" external to them. This means that we have a universe in which "fiction" and "reality" coalesce in a realm of "simulacra." The universe replaces the old one in which people BELIEVED that "fiction" copied some original that was "real." The new post-modern universe, with its celebration of the look — the surfaces, textures, the self-as-commodity — threatens to reduce everything to the image\representation\simulacrum. (44)

In *Crossings* designer names allow a "celebration of the look — the surfaces, textures, the self-as-commodity" that indeed "threatens to reduce everything to the image\representation\simulacrum." Steel's designer moments halt the narrative; like advertisements, they are, in John Berger's term, "eventless" (153), and they prevent the plot from progressing. Steels' characters cannot and do not grow; they only get redisplayed over and over again by being marked from the outside.

Steel's two epigraphs, "For John, beyond words, beyond love, beyond anything...d.s." and on the following page "Strong people cannot be defeated..." place the novel self-consciously inside the sentimental tradition. As "overly sweet" as these epigraphs may appear to our critical tastebuds, they do hint at several important characteristics of the sentimental tradition. The sentimental novel always attempts to reach "beyond words" towards a communion of sympathy, of tears, which escapes rational categories. For example,

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the use of asterisks, dashes or other forms of silence was one traditional stylistic tool that represented this attempt to reach beyond words; the use of overdetermined language and an abundance of language was another. Steel's second epigraph, particularly in conjunction with the first, suggests the perfection of the sentimental heroine, who cannot be defeated no matter how many trials and tribulations she has to endure. The sentimental narrative constructs a perfect space, a space "beyond anything" in which the heroine's "perfection" can be appreciated, by the sympathetic reader and, often, by an ideal, sympathetic community.

Keeping those characteristics in mind, Steel's use of designer names in the description and construction (and the two are really the same in this case) of her characters can be seen as a modern — or better post-modern — revision of old demands of the sentimental tradition. Designer names give Steel's heroes and heroines a perfection that touches us in a way advertisements do, subliminally, irrationally, "beyond words" — indeed "beyond any-thing." Rather than sentimental sympathy, readers may be said to feel (in Berger's words) "envy." Berger feels that advertisements

[propose] to each one of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives....
Publicity persuades us of such a transformation by showing us people who have apparently been transformed and are, as a result, enviable.
The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour. (131)

The "glamour" of Steel's characters manifests itself in their designer exteriors and their matching virtuous interior. Virtue, as it was exhibited in the nineteenth century sentimental novel, could be said to be translated into glamour in Steel's post-modern sentimentality. By reading Steel's novels, readers dream of a transformation, as did readers in the nineteenth century. But unlike in the nineteenth century reading experience, in the post-modern sentimental reading the transformation hoped for is not primarily a *bildung*, a moral growth, but a better design which can perhaps be achieved through consumption. "Envy," then, is the post-modern version of sentimental sympathy.

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Steel's characters do not grow towards perfection, as traditional sentimental heroines do; they simply embody perfection. Steel's "strong" characters are simply well-designed. Virtue is easily equated with the tasteful beige and pink Chanel suit. Steel's easy fit of interior and exterior self makes a sentimental ending possible. When stripped of their possessions, as the characters are when crossing the Atlantic during World War II, they never lose their attractiveness. Steel writes:

he was in his borrowed seaman's garb. She was wearing gray flannel slacks and an old sweater, her hair loose in the wind.... She had totally unassuming ways, as did Nick. It was part of their inner beauty. (203)

Even when in distress, Steel's characters still appear to look good; now their poses remind us of an advertisement for jeans or other more casual designer clothes. Steel's post-modern sentimentality never tries to convince us of her characters' inner beauty; we already know about that beauty because the Cartier watch and the Chanel suit have marked Nick and Liane as beautiful in every way, and this later "shot" recasts them as equally beautiful, only in a different style.

Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is as self-consciously placed in the realist tradition as Steel's novel is placed in the sentimental. Fiction writer, critic, and journalist, Wolfe has framed his work for us in an abundance of commentary, all of which reiterates that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* has to be seen apart from its postmodern contemporaries and inside the realist tradition defined by writers such as Balzac and Zola. In an interview he says that Zola was his model: "It's the idea of the novelist putting the individual in the setting of society at large and realizing the pressure society exerts on the individual" (Angelo 288f.).

And yet, Wolfe uses techniques very similar to Steel's. His narration is not just a chronicle — as he claims — but also very visual and gestural. True to the demands of realism, Wolfe draws members of all classes, or "status groups" — from the Bronx kid, to the Bronx district Attorney Kramer, to the "Master of the Universe" Sherman McCoy. He paints them also in quick strokes; and he also uses designer names to do so. But unlike Steel's characters, who are

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unaware of being created through designer names, Wolfe's characters are consistently involved in their own design. Like vogueurs, they see themselves as others see them. To them, everything becomes a brand name — their names, ethnicities, addresses, salaries, etc. They, like the readers, know what it means that they drive a Mercedes or a Buick, that they live in the West Seventies or Park Avenue. When Sherman McCoy picks up his girlfriend Maria from the airport, he gazes at her expensive wardrobe and her "nose-up sprocket-hipped model-girl gait calculated to provoke maximum envy and resentment." Sherman notices her

matched [luggage] set, cream colored leather trim on the edges. Vulgar, but not as vulgar as Louis Vuitton, thought Sherman.... He wondered how he was going to get it all in the Mercedes". (75-6)

Unlike in Steel's novel, here we have a complicated net of gazes. Sherman looks at Maria and assesses her according to designer names and standards. He and Maria are both aware of being watched by "people staring" at the same time. And finally, Sherman's own position in relation to Maria is expressed through his sense that her stuff may not "fit" into his Mercedes. Designer names function in this passage to delineate social boundaries and to show the characters' preoccupation with their own designer selves.

Driven by "envy," Wolfe's characters engage in what he labels "plutography." In an interview with Bonnie Angelo, Wolfe explains the term:

Status is an influence at every level. We resist the notion that it matters, but it's true. You can't escape it. You see it in restaurants — not just in New York. People seem willing to pay any amount to be seen at this week's restaurant of the century. It's all part of what I call plutography; depicting the acts of the rich. They not only want to be seen at this week's restaurant of the century, they want to be embraced by the owner. But status isn't only to do with the rich. Status is fundamental, an inescapable part of human life. (287)

Asked about the importance of clothing, Wolfe adds: "Clothing is a wonderful doorway that most easily leads you to the heart of an individual; it's the way they reveal themselves" (287). And yet, in

The Bonfire of the Vanities clothing seems to reveal very little about the "heart" of Wolfe's characters; indeed, the novel barely gives the impression that Wolfe's characters have hearts at all. Instead, they are what they seem; they also, like Steel characters, are surfaces, simulacra, and their only characteristic is their never ending interest in designing themselves.

Tom Wolfe's book engages quite self-consciously in a discussion of the self. Wolfe's novel, like Steel's, involves a stripping and redressing of the main characters. McCoy loses his outward self — his Park Avenue address, his designer clothes, his job as "The Master of the Universe." In his own words, he dies; he becomes a person without a "proper name." For a moment the novel seems to suggest that Sherman gets in touch with his "animal self," or that he gets "reborn" (512). But, instead, McCoy's self is now nothing more than a "public arcade." "[B]y the thousands, no, the millions, they [the public] now came scampering into the cavity of what he had presumed to be his self, Sherman McCoy" (513). The wheel of fortune has spun in Wolfe's novel, and almost all characters have redesigned themselves. Wolfe's novel does not assert a sense of interior self; instead, selves are nothing more than "cavities," "transitory composite[s] of materials borrowed from the environment" (512).²

That is, Wolfe revises realism as much as Steel revises sentimentality. Wolfe's realist urge to "put the individual in the setting of society at large and [to realize] the pressure society exerts on the individual" (288f) ends in a post-modern vision of the self as cavity. In the carousel of social mobility Wolfe depicts, interior selves get lost. What remains are designs, "manufactured identities" that can be worn, lost, or discarded like clothes.

In both novels, designer names create "designer selves." Steel's post-modern version of sentimentality relies on the logic of advertisements which allows us to believe in an easy equation between exterior and interior selves. The best designed self will be rewarded and is deserving. Steel's novels cannot bring moral satisfaction but can only create a desire for the next Steel novel, a repetition of fragmented pleasures. Wolfe's biting satire exposes the "cavity" underneath the designer names. Wolfe makes social mobility an act of consumption, an alienating, ridiculous performance. He uses

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designer names to represent social boundaries and nuances, but he has nothing to hold against the artificialities of such boundaries — not even his characters who live for and through these boundaries alone.

While each novel identifies itself with a nineteenth century tradition that is based on the belief in an interior self — even though each tradition views the relation between this individual self and society differently — both novels' use of designer names problematizes such an identification. Both narratives are engaged in a search for a notion of selfhood but each narrative finds design instead. Steel repeats images of glamour and redisplayes her characters as signs of perfection, while Wolfe throws his characters into a carnival of signs and designs which render his suggestions of McCoy's "rebirth" incredible. Through the techniques of advertisement Steel has given up the possibilities of development in her characters, while Wolfe's ironic rendering of "plutography" leaves him only with the sense of self as "cavity." Once engaged in a post-modern world of pure sign, neither novel is able to assert a world outside of fragmented images, of pure representation. The use of designer names then, adopted out of a sense of realism, leads to both novels', perhaps unintended, participation in and appeal to the post-modern sensibility.

Harvard University

Notes

¹ I am indebted to Professor Leonard Ashley for bringing this quote to my attention; he used it to introduce the talk on which this essay is based at the Conference on Language and Literature in Cortland, New York in 1992.

² For an insightful discussion of notions of "self" in capitalism see Richard Godden's book *Fictions of Capital*. Godden suggests in his chapter on "Some slight shifts in the manner of the novel of manners" that "fashions" have supplanted "manners," and accordingly a "integrative selfhood" has been replaced by a "disintegrative selfhood" (21).

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