

Consumerism, Celebrity Culture and the Aesthetic Impure in Oscar Wilde

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Abstract This article investigates the discursive arena in which Oscar Wilde exercised his countercultural and necessarily impure aesthetic taste, focusing on some defining aspects and texts of Wilde's epopee, namely his cult of celebrity, which was nourished, in particular, by his 1882 tour of the United States, his interest in performance – which turned the author into the director and main actor of the very drama entitled 'Oscar Wilde' – and his apparently contradictory approach to consumer culture. Wilde, indeed, seemed to embrace opposite stances in relation to consumerism as it is witnessed by such works as «The Soul of Man Under Socialism» and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, on the one side, and «The Decay of Lying», *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, on the other. This article also reads Wilde's last play *The Importance of Being Earnest* in terms of a «performance about performance», rooted as Wilde's previous plays in consumer culture and capable of deconstructing the Victorian highly normative (and 'rational') approach to gender and, in particular, to masculinity.

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1 Staging 'Oscar Wilde': Celebrity, Iconicity and Performance in Wilde's Discourse

In the introductory notes to *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde* (2007) Paul Fortunato focuses on Wilde's ambiguity in relation to consumer culture, noting how one of Wilde's most famous essays, «The Soul of Man Under Socialism», seems to stand as a powerful critique of consumerism and of the practitioners of consumer culture in both journalism and fashion. Nevertheless, a play like *Lady Windermere's Fan*, written just a few months after the essay, seems to legitimate that very culture standing as Wilde's first big commercial success, capable of attracting a very vast audience. As queer theorists have shown, Wilde's most interesting feature is his liminality, his capacity for

rejecting a fixed, predictable, centralizing frame of mind, in short, his resistance to the irreconcilability of contradictory, even opposite realities; in this sense, Wilde's impure 'aesthetics' – with its roots in capitalist consumerism – seems to reflect this very complexity.

Wilde cleverly manipulated consumer culture in order to articulate a fresh and intelligent discourse in which the very interplay of surface, image and ritual allowed him to elevate elements which Victorian culture tended to marginalize – «things gendered feminine, considered as bodily rather than rational, and often marked as Oriental» – in order to «de-center the Western, rationalist, masculinist subject» offering in this way a «conception of art that is not anti-Western but otherwise-than-Western» (Fortunato 2007, p. ix).

In the present article, we will try – through a theoretical and methodological frame in which Bakhtinian dialogism, Celebrity, Performance and Masculinities Studies speak to each other – to access and investigate the discursive arena in which the author exercised his countercultural (and necessarily impure) aesthetic taste. We will focus in particular on some defining aspects and texts of Wilde's epopee, namely his cult of celebrity, which was also nourished by his 1882 tour of the United States, his interest in performance – which, as we will see, turned him into the director and actor of the very drama entitled 'Oscar Wilde' – and his apparently contradictory aesthetic stance. Wilde, indeed, seemed to embrace opposite and irreconcilable approaches to consumerism, as it is witnessed by such works as «The Soul of Man Under Socialism» and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, on the one side, and «The Decay of Lying», *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, on the other.

Wilde managed, in the highly normative and morally rigid context of late Victorian England, to turn himself into something resembling a contemporary celebrity. Interestingly, Su Holmes and Sean Redmond stress how celebrity does not reside in the individual: it is constituted discursively, «by the way in which the individual is represented» (Holmes, Redmond 2010, p. 4). Of course, the issue of representation is of paramount importance in any discourse 'by' and 'on' Oscar Wilde; if on the one hand Wilde, in his complex effort of self-promotion, became «the most self-conscious marketer of his own image» (Kaye 2004, p. 193), on the other, in this very process of construction, the media of the time played a key role, which, however, at times exceeded the possibility of control by the author himself.

Making reference to some of the caricatures circulating on such magazines as *Moonshine* – and in particular to the one entitled «days with celebrities» (1882), portraying an iconic Wilde holding a sunflower – Lois Cucullu notes how

Wilde was acclaimed and mocked as a celebrity in English society, when the very category and term, as scholars and critics have shown,

were just gaining attraction in the popular vernacular. Indeed the scholarly community writing on celebrity has rightly come to regard him [...] as helping to inaugurate the phenomenon of celebrity culture that is one hallmark of twentieth- and twenty-first century modernity. (Cucullu 2010, p. 19)

The *Moonshine* caricature, as Cucullu observes, projects towards the collapse of the barrier separating private from public life that mass media would aggressively come to exploit, an issue on which almost all of the studies on celebrity seem to focus. In this sense, in *Celebrity*, Chris Rojek identifies four main features of celebrity. First of all, it implies «impact on public consciousness»; second, «celebrities are cultural fabrications», indeed, as Rojek observes, «no celebrity acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries» (Rojek 2001, p. 10). Third, celebrity always implies a split between private self and a public self, or between a ‘veridical self’ and a ‘public face’, indeed «the public presentation of the self is always a staged activity, in which the human actor presents a ‘front’ or ‘face’ to others while keeping a significant portion of the self in reserve. For the celebrity the split between the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’ is often disturbing» (p. 11). Finally, Rojek identifies a fourth aspect relating to celebrity, that is the category of ‘renown’ referring «to the informal attribution of distinction within a given social network», which is typical of individuals who «have a sort of localized fame within the particular social assemblage of which they are a part», on the contrary «the fame of the celebrity is ubiquitous» (p. 12).

Wilde’s position seems particularly interesting if we take into account the artist’s and the man’s capacity for transcending spatial and temporal borders, articulating, in this sense, a complex condition of celebrity. In short, «the secret of [Wilde’s] success is given by the artist’s ability to translate his life into a form of writing and his writing into a vital gesture which articulates a complex critique of late nineteenth century English society» (Martino 2013, p. 140). According to cultural critic Michael Bracewell – author of *England is Mine, Pop Life in Albion from Wilde to Goldie* (1997) and director of possibly the best TV documentary on Wilde, the 1997 *Oscar* (BBC) – the Anglo-Irish writer stands as the first pop star of British history, a pop idol, a cultural icon who put all his genius in his life and only his talent in his work, in the desperate and yet successful attempt to turn his life into a ‘work of art’.

If celebrity is constituted discursively, it can be argued that Wilde’s iconicity implies a kind of double articulation based on a complex discourse involving past and present; Wilde’s iconicity also relates, indeed, to the author’s after-life. Wilde not only became a celebrity in his own time, but ‘wrote’ and performed a script which – through a number of cultural appropriations and performances – gave him iconic status in today’s popular

culture. Indeed, in the twentieth and in the twenty-first centuries, Wilde's self-conscious construction of his identity and his performance of an ironic masculinity (Beynon 2002) have become sources of inspiration for many artists such as Truman Capote, Andy Warhol, Stephen Fry, David Bowie, Gavin Friday, Morrissey and Will Self (a self-confessed fan of Wilde) in key fields such as music, literature, cinema and television, showing how the strength of Wilde's life and work also resides in the ease with which they are translated into non-literary modes.¹

Addressing Wilde in terms of 'icon' also implies referring to him in terms of «a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration» (OED 1999, p. 704). Undoubtedly, there is a religious aspect connected with Wilde's iconicity, which today brings admirers to worship both his image and the many dimensions connected to that image (it is possible to speak, indeed, of a Wilde cult; his image and his epigrams are everywhere on t-shirts, album covers, posters). According to Rojek, «as modern society developed, celebrities have filled the absence created by the decay in the popular belief in the divine rights of kings, and the death of God» (Rojek 2001, pp. 13-14). In short, in coincidence with the emergence of consumerism the belief in God waned and celebrities became immortal; Rojek makes reference to such icons as John Lennon, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, addressing them in terms of «idols of cult worship», idols whose fame is also connected to a tragic dimension, something which, of course, also happens with Wilde. Interestingly, Terry Eagleton entitled a play focusing on Wilde's life *Saint Oscar* (1997), a title which, besides projecting towards the tragic epilogue of Wilde's parable, also makes reference to a trend in gay studies and in gay culture in general to see Wilde as the first homosexual martyr of history; something which seems to connect to Wilde's 'construction' of himself in *De Profundis*, where the author emerges as a Christ-like figure to be opposed to the demonic representation of Douglas.

In order to fully understand Wilde's iconic status, it is necessary to analyse the man or rather the many men, the many roles played or better 'performed' by Wilde in his lifetime. In this sense, Waldrep observes how:

1 Interestingly in his 1998 cult movie *Velvet Goldmine*, Todd Haynes offers his audience the image of Wilde as pop icon and idol, featuring two kinds of Wildean performance: the character of Oscar Wilde (presented as a young student who in a Victorian school scene stands and declares «I want to be a Pop Idol») as well as a number of other male characters, moving within the world of 1970s glam culture, who stage their Wildean interest in artifice, self-construction, and gender bending. In the opening scene the infant Wilde is brought to earth on a glittering spaceship that moves like a shooting star, a sequence through which Haynes refers to Wilde's extraterrestrial genius; then we find ourselves in the second half of the twentieth century, where the main character (Arthur) is trying to investigate the mysterious disappearance of glam-rock star Brian Slade, a fictional equivalent of 1970s icon David Bowie.

Wilde's trajectory was not toward some ultimate being, but the beginning in earnest of a system of becoming, that left any belief that there could be a natural, stable Oscar Wilde. Wilde's legacy as both a writer and a literary figure of social, political and cultural significance is such that Wilde the man cannot be readily separated by Wilde the careerist. His roles, as aesthete, lecturer, businessman, family man, poet, editor, playwright, seducer, prisoner and exile are part of a broader role of writer as performer that he used self-consciously in an attempt to destroy the binary opposition, separating art and life. (Waldrep 2004, p. xiii)

In this perspective, Wilde's life can be usefully analyzed through the theoretical frame offered by performance studies. According to Coppa:

Performance studies recognizes that behavior, as well as speech, is a language that has rules and is structured by a grammar, and, as with any other language, comprehension depends on re-cognition or knowing something again when we see it. (Coppa 2004, p. 73)

In short, performing doesn't simply mean doing, but «showing doing», in short 'staging' behavior. All human behavior is learned and then put on some sort of display. In this regard, Heather Marcowitch notes how:

The poetics of the performance of the self, according to Wilde are disarmingly simple: assume and always be conscious of one's inherent fragmentary nature, cultivate each fragment to the best of its artistic possibilities and do so under the rubric of a secular morality that stresses compassion and community with others. (Marcowitch 2010, p. 13)

Wilde's capacity for self-fashioning and marketing his identities owes much to his very peculiar background, in which a key role is played, by his Oxford/early London years, by his tour of the United States and by the successful productive season starting with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which includes the composition (and the first performances) of his major theatrical works.

As is well known, the young Wilde made a very good impression at Oxford with his beautiful figure, elegance of manners and brilliant conversation. At Oxford he performed the role of the Englishman; as John Sloan observes: «Wilde's lifelong performance was actually that of an Oxonian, which meant a distinct feeling of cultural superiority to the rest of society» (Sloan 2003, p. 6). Wilde adopted an Oxford accent, developing «his own languid, melodic version, of the intonations of his Oxford friends» (p. 6). This transformation at the prosodic level was also accompanied by interesting visual developments. Besides adopting a dandified look and way of dressing, with long hair and velvet suits, Wilde started decorating his Magdalen rooms with

blue vases filled with lilies, the recognized symbol of the then fashionable Pre-Raphaelites. As we will see, practices such as these are particularly significant and illuminating in relation to Wilde's commitment to consumer culture and project towards the very aesthetics that will nourish his mature works from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to *An Ideal Husband*.

Interestingly, when Wilde came down from Oxford to London in 1879 he self-designated himself on his visiting cards as «professor of aesthetics». In London Wilde had not only to reinvent himself but also to make his way in the commercial world, in which, of course, the press played a crucial role. As Sloan observes:

the production and underconsumption of new commodities initiated the modern techniques of advertising. The process also absorbed and assimilated the artist turning the earlier image of the artist as hero and critic of society into the commodified image of the artist as colorful personality. (p. 10)

And yet Wilde used the new methods of advertising in order to oppose the very culture in which they were taking root. Besides, Wilde was also taking advantage of the mixing of higher and middle classes, which offered opportunities for mobility. In this sense, his visibility was also given by his ability to be everywhere, offering his precious epigrams and observations and mixing with celebrities such as Lillie Langtry.

2 Oscar Wilde in America and the Aesthetic Impure

Wilde became a global celebrity during his 1882 tour of the United States; as any contemporary pop star in order to become a proper celebrity he had first to be 'big' in America. The chance was given by the success of Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, *Patience or Bunthorne's Bride* (1881), which focused on the look and manner of the aesthete in the character of Bunthorne. Richard D'Oyly Carte, the show's producer, offered Wilde a series of promotional lectures to provide American audiences with the chance to see a real life aesthete; a similar practice was to become quite popular in the 1960s with British rock and pop artists, such as the Beatles, promoting their albums in long American tours. Interestingly, Wilde didn't link his name with opera as a form of high art but with operetta as a form of low culture entertainment.

Legend says that on his arrival in New York a customs official asked him if he had anything to declare, Wilde promptly answered: «I have nothing to declare except my genius» (Morris 2013, p. 1); Wilde's famous epigram is, among other things, a sign of his astonishing linguistic and conversation skills,

in an attempt to transcribe his unique style of lecturing, one American journalist went so far as to devise a system of diacritical marks to represent the elaborate pauses and inflections that Wilde would use to manipulate his audience. (Waldrep 2004, p. 66)

Indeed Wilde's speech was music. He was a great improviser who knew that society – that is, any form of social interaction – is, as Schutz (1976) puts it, playing music together. In this musical performance, in which he mixed different genres (stories, philosophy, wit), very often form becomes more relevant than content. Wilde's epigrams, which he would easily utter in his speeches with the same elegance and stillness of his characters, were in a sense evergreen melodies on which he improvised in different contexts. Indeed Wilde – as a man and artist fully immersed in consumer culture – used to recycle his epigrams in plays, essays and everyday conversation. In this sense one might create a link between Wilde and a great American icon, Andy Warhol, himself «of the Wilde sort» (as E. M. Foster's Maurice defines himself in the 1914 novel), who based much of his art on seriality and who, like Wilde, treated trivial things as the most important of things and vice versa.

Wilde prepared carefully for his tour. In this sense he became much concerned about what to wear and thought of a costume for his tailor to make; those who saw his first appearances in the States remember his green overcoat and Polish cap. Most importantly, during the tour hundreds of photographs were shot of the aesthete in his poses, like the famous Sarony photos which – showing Wilde in his typical costume for the American tour, with his velveteen jacket and knickers and his well-known long hair – perfectly capture the author's look and capacity for self-promotion.

Wilde «was aware, as he had been at Trinity and Oxford, that he had no talent for oratory. He repeatedly confessed as much in America. What he had to do was to cultivate a way of charming rather than coercing his audience» (Ellmann 1987, p. 147). Wilde prepared his first lecture in America with this very awareness in mind; probably he was waiting to measure the cultural temperature before doing so. The first of the three major lectures he delivered in the States was entitled «The English Renaissance of Art» (the remaining two were entitled «The Decorative Arts» and «The House Beautiful»).

In «The English Renaissance of Art» he offered a reconsidered aestheticism; Wilde's aesthetic taste appeared, indeed, as a necessarily impure one. It is well known that, in «Economimesis», Derrida (1981) offers a reading of Kant's view of aesthetic judgment in *The Critique of Judgment* in which he shows how the idealist elaboration of the aesthetic as an ontological question (with its implicit stress on an idea of purity) necessarily excludes consideration of the material and historical forces that are continually transforming representational practices and aesthetic experiences.

Wilde, as we have seen, was well aware of these forces and shaped his aesthetics accordingly; in this sense his discourse was capable of resolving, or better harmonizing, in an extremely complex and intelligent way, such dichotomies as body and soul, external and internal.

It is important to stress how Wilde's aesthetics² and his very idea of beauty are the outcome of a complex process of harmonization of the theories of his two masters, namely Ruskin and Pater (even though, it must be said, many of Wilde's ideas are more heavily indebted to Pater's doctrine). As is well known, for Ruskin beauty had to be associated with good, while for Pater it could have the taste of evil. If Ruskin was interested in religion, Pater was more attracted by the excesses of mysticism; moreover, Ruskin's credo privileged conscience and discipline, while Pater's was a doctrine centred on imagination, and which considered beauty as something contextual.

2 Wilde's aesthetics finds a 'critical' systematization in six major essays written by the author between 1885 and 1890: «The Truth of Masks» (1885), «The Decay of Lying» (1889), «Pen, Pencil and Poison» (1889), «The Critic as Artist» (1890) - which were published together in a volume significantly entitled *Intentions* (1891) - «The Portrait of Mr. W.H.» (an 1889 long narrative on the theme of forgery) and «The Soul of Man Under Socialism» (1890). An overview of the different subjects developed by Wilde in these essays can be found in two short essays: Longxi (1988) and Becker-Leckrone (2002). Longxi articulates a defence of Wilde's position as a serious Late-Victorian thinker, creating a link between Wilde's «creative criticism», his praise of «lying» in art and more recent theoretical currents. Becker-Leckrone, besides pointing to Wilde's Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a distillation of the paradoxical, equivocal theoretical framework the essays collectively establish, stresses (making reference to Dowling, 1986) how Wilde's use of paradox and other verbal complexities do not represent a funny camouflage for serious ideas, but «performative» demonstrations of them. As we have already noted, in Wilde's discourse, form and content very often coincide, according to a profoundly musical stance. Danson (1997) concentrates, in an extremely rich text, on «the artist in his criticism» with a special focus on the 1891 collection. He sets Wilde's criticism in context and shows how the Anglo-Irish writer sought to create a new ideal culture by elevating «lies» above history, almost erasing the distinction between artist and critic, and ending the sway of «nature» over human desire. Wilde's criticism is also at the centre of a 1997 study by Brown in which the author attempts to define Wilde's conceptions of what art is and what it is not and of what the experience of art means in the modern world, tracing the experimental character of Wilde's thought from its resonance in his own life through its development within the tradition of aesthetic philosophy. As we have already seen, Wilde's aesthetics seems to exceed the author's 'intentions' to embrace on the one side what Fortunato (2007) defines in terms of «modernist aesthetics» and on the other what Waldrep (2004) has addressed in terms of «aesthetics of self-invention» which, deriving from Wilde's interest in masks and appearance, stands as a critical space to access the postmodern fascination with performance. It is here also worth mentioning Volume IV of the *OET* critical edition of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (2007) edited by Josephine Guy which includes «Intentions» and «Historical Criticism» (1879) and offers invaluable commentary and notes, giving details of where phrases, arguments and sources similar to those of the essays are used in other works in Wilde's *oeuvre*. Once again, Wilde's aesthetics emerges as something which can hardly be limited to theoretical formulations; in Wilde theory and practice, art and life always coincide, there is no space for purity, his aesthetics is a process not a product, which exceeds spatial and temporal boundaries and asks for an active response by the reader.

Wilde's capacity for synthesizing different even opposite perspectives conveyed a remarkable strength to the ideas he introduced during his American lectures. With regard to «The English Renaissance of Art» Ellmann notes how:

By beautifying the outward aspects of life, [Wilde] would beautify the inner ones. To disarm those who expected him to say what beauty was, he quoted Goethe in support of defining beauty by example, not by philosophical hairsplitting. The English Renaissance was, he said, like the Italian Renaissance before it, 'a sort of new birth of the spirit of man'. Under this rubric he could discuss the desire for a more gracious and comely way of life, the passion for physical beauty, the attention to form rather than content, the search for new subjects of poetry, for new forms of art, for new intellectual and imaginative enjoyments. The new Euphorion was, as Goethe had foreseen, the product of mating Hellenism and romanticism, Helen of Troy and Faust. [...] It was the capacity to render, not the capacity to feel, which brought true art into being. And once in being, art conferred upon life a value it had not heretofore had. Its creations were more real than the living. [...] Wilde was piecing together his later discovery that life imitates art. (Ellmann 1987, pp. 157-158)

The lecture was first delivered in New York on 9 January. Wilde impressed the audience with his attire and his very peculiar modality of enunciation. He entered on stage with a circular cavalier cloak over his shoulder; his voice was clear, easy and not forced, he changed pose now and then, the head inclining towards the strong foot, and kept a general appearance of repose.

What Wilde had succeeded in presenting and 'selling' was not so much precepts as a personality. That personality became the subject of vivid contention as he zigzagged impossibly across the country on a tour which lasted until 27 December.

Many so took to heart Wilde's proclaimed mission «to make this artistic movement the basis for a new civilization» (Hofer, Scharnhorst 2010, p. 99), that craft societies and museum patronage blossomed in his wake. Letters home had Wilde crowing that he was a bigger genius than Dickens; in this sense, the personal adulation necessitated three secretaries, of whom Wilde wrote: «one writes my autographs all day for my admirers, the other receives the flowers that are left really every ten minutes. A third whose hair resembles mine is obliged to send off locks of his own hair to the myriad maidens of the city, and so is rapidly becoming bald» (Holland, Davis 2000, p. 126).

Wilde was, however, an easy, if not eager target in America. A few mocked his poetry or his ideas, including the self-assured Scot Archibald

Forbes who found Wilde's knee breeches particularly repellent; some, at their peril, mocked his utterances and if a few newspapers took his side, the greater number tried to make him look foolish. In this sense, Wilde's gender bending and coded performances were scorned publicly; he was mocked as a degenerate in satirical cartoons, a monkey with a flower, in such papers as *Harper's Weekly* and the *Washington Post*. It must be stressed, however, how for Wilde newspapers basically meant interviews, which represented a very precious resource for the construction of his celebrity.

Wilde sat for at least ninety-eight interviews while touring North America between January and November 1882, which again the aesthete conducted as if they were proper performances. As Hofer and Scharnhorst observe:

The interviewer would arrive to find him playing the part of the idle aesthete, lounging in a chair or on a sofa. Wilde would leap to his feet, shake the interviewer's hand, and offer him a seat. At the first prompt he would deliver a scripted line (e.g. «No art is better than bad art»). The conversation would end at a predetermined moment when his manager or valet would enter the room. (Hofer, Scharnhorst 2010, p. 4)

Interviewers, as Wilde knew, were a 'product' of American civilization. Celebrity interviews began to appear in American newspapers in the early 1870s and traveling lectures were a convenient source of copy for reporters. While Henry James and Mark Twain decried the new celebrity culture, Oscar Wilde, like Whitman, embraced it creating a paradigm to perform for the new generations up until the new millennium.

And yet, as we have said, newspapers and journalists often attacked him. This paradoxically gave Wilde a new confidence. They could attack him, but they could not take their eyes off him. Derision was a form of tribute, and if it went on long enough, could not fail to be so interpreted. He could moreover appeal, over the heads of the journalists, to the people. During the twelve months in America, he learned how to mock his mockers; this is also, in a sense, the essence of contemporary celebrity culture.

After a few weeks from his arrival in New York, Wilde discovered that he would need another lecture besides «The English Renaissance»; in this sense, he wrote not one but two more lectures:³ «The Decorative Arts» and «The House Beautiful». The first was more closely linked to «The English Renaissance», drawing upon Ruskin and Morris for its examples. In «The Decorative Arts»:

3 A fourth lecture entitled «The Irish Poets of 1848» was delivered first in San Francisco at the end of March and then in a few other places. In it he focused on Smith O' Brien, John Mitchel, Charles Gavan Duffy, Thomas Davis and James Clarence Mangan.

Wilde described the recent rise of handicrafts in England, and the advantage of having work made by delighted craftsmen rather than by unfeeling machines.⁴ He moved fluently from point to point, not worrying much about organization, trusting to what quickly became dependable pattern. Modern dress was ignoble, as could be seen in sculptures [...] There must be schools of art, and these must be in more immediate relation with trade and manufacturing than now. Art should portray the men who cover the world with a network of iron and the sea with ships. (Ellmann 1987, p. 183)

The second lecture, «The House Beautiful», was even more prescriptive. Here Wilde's performative skills, his theatrical and complex enunciation proved, more than in other cases, of paramount importance:

Wilde metaphorically walked through the house, commenting on the mistakes he had observed. The entrance hall should be papered, since it was too close to the outdoors; wainscoting was better. It should not be carpeted but tiled. Secondary colors should be used on walls and ceilings of rooms. Large gas chandeliers should be replaced by side brackets. Windows must be small to avoid glaring light. Ugly heating stoves must give way to Dutch porcelain stoves. No artificial flowers. Blown glass rather than cut glass. Queen Anne furniture. He passed on the house's inhabitants and the subject of dress. Women should eschew furbelows and corsets, and emulate the drapery on Greek statuary. As for men the only well dressed men he had seen in America were the Colorado miners with wide-brimmed hats and long cloaks. Knee breeches like his were more sensible than trousers. After such instructions Wilde passed on the relation of art to morals. Instead of saying there was none, he argues that art had a spiritual ministry; it could raise and sanctify everything it touched. (pp. 183-184)

The tour was undoubtedly a successful one. In his running commentary to friends at home he described some of the most striking moments. Referring to one talk in Leadville, a mining town in the Rocky Mountains, he wrote: «I spoke to them of the early Florentines, and they slept as though no crime had ever stained the ravines of their mountain home» (Holland, Davis 2000, p. 161). Wilde agreeably descended to the bottom of a silver mine in a bucket. There, to great cheering, he dined, drank whiskey and smoked a cigar, all but preamble to the main event:

4 Interestingly Wilde, while objecting to machine-made articles, allowed that machinery could in some ways free people for better use of time.

Then I had to open a new vein, or lode, which with a silver drill I brilliantly performed, amidst unanimous applause. The silver drill was presented to me and the lode named 'The Oscar'. I had hoped that in their simple grand way they would have offered me shares in 'The Oscar' but in their artless untutored fashion they did not. Only the silver drill remains as a memory of my night at Leadville. (p. 162)

While in the bar that same night with the miners and the female friends of the miners, Wilde noticed the sign «Please don't shoot the pianist; he is doing his best», which, in his short essay «Impressions of America», he defined as «the only rational method of art criticism he had ever come across» (Mason 1906, p. 31). Back in England, Wilde recalled this with delight. He wrote: «I was struck with this recognition of the fact that bad art merits the penalty of death, and I felt that in this remote city, where the aesthetic applications of the revolver were clearly established in the case of music, my apostolic task would be much simplified, as indeed it was» (Sherard 1906, p. 226).

The whole tour was as Ellmann puts it «an achievement of courage and grace, along with ineptitude and self-advertisement. Wilde succeeded in naturalizing the word aesthetic. However effeminate his doctrines were thought to be, they constituted the most determined and sustained attack upon materialistic vulgarity that America had seen» (Ellmann 1987, p. 195).

3 Writings from a Consumer Age: *The Picture Dorian Gray*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*

Although the American tour turned him into an iconic figure, Wilde's fame is (especially today) strictly associated with his cult and only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91), a work which played a key role in the very process of construction of his celebrity status and in the mythical fall that followed the two trials, after which he articulated a new version of himself and of his celebrity status in the long epistola addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas, commonly known as *De Profundis*. According to Cucullu:

Ironically what both fuels and hastens [Wilde's] physical downfall is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. At his first trial and thereafter, this story serves as evidence of Wilde's profligacy and his sodomitical associations that persist down to the present. So while the novella continues willy-nilly to be read as a melodramatic parable of deviance, moral corruption and self-destruction, it persists more radically as Wilde's uncanny foretelling of his own cultural rise and physical ruin. (Cucullu 2010, p. 21)

It is interesting to note how *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s three protagonists seem to reflect three aspects of Wilde himself; indeed, in a letter to Ralph Payne, Wilde declared: «Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be – in other ages perhaps» (Holland, Davis 2000, p. 585). As Michael Gillespie observes, the tension between «the probity of Basil, the immorality of Lord Henry and the unabashed self-indulgence of Dorian combine to echo the author's conflicting feelings» (Gillespie 2007, p. x) during the early 1890s, and somehow inform the audience's response to his work and to his public persona in the following years. Interestingly, Wilde's cult novel can be read, more than any other work in Wilde's canon, as a complex and severe critique of consumerism itself, with, possibly, the only exception of «The Soul of Man under Socialism». In this essay, indeed, Wilde's interest in Christ led him (as will happen later with *De Profundis*) to write about the positive aspects of a non-materialistic life and the abandonment of wealth in the search for an ideal socialist society. In Wilde's account of Matthew 6:19-24, the idea that an individual should not «imagine that your perfection lies in accumulating or possessing external things [as] your affection is inside of you» (Wilde 1997a, p. 1047) assumes a heavily counter-cultural connotation, and seems to be somehow at odds with Wilde's own personality. But again Wilde's aesthetics is all about the coexistence and harmonization of contradictory, even opposite stances.

The Picture of Dorian Gray shows the modality in which 'the soul of man under capitalism' can embrace corruption and self-destruction. In this sense, the harsh dissonance between Basil's and Lord Henry's views of Dorian highlights the discrepancy between an authentic love of beauty and the more superficial tension towards a materialistic desire. In this sense, Basil's enthusiasm for coming «face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself» (Gillespie 2007, p. 10) offers a more interesting and fascinating 'picture' of Dorian than Henry's idea that the young boy is «some brainless, beautiful creature, who should always be here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always here in summer when we want something to chill our intelligence» (p. 7). If on the one side Basil appreciates him for the charm of his character, on the other Henry's indifference for his intellectual skills in favour of his beauty reflects the consumerist propensities of Lord Henry himself, who almost appears to stand as a personification of materialistic culture itself. In this sense, Basil's desire for Henry not to meet Dorian can be read as a reflection of Wilde's criticism of materialism's corrupting influence. Indeed, when he affirms that «your influence would be bad» (p. 16), because it would contaminate Dorian's simple and beautiful nature, he points to the negative effects materialism can have on what we might define purity of 'the soul'.

Interestingly, Regenia Gagnier notes how in his only novel, through the character of Lord Henry, Wilde was able to capture «the essence of modern economic man when he named the cigarette the perfect type of a perfect pleasure because it left one unsatisfied. For this reason, of course, the cigarette is the perfect commodity» (Gagnier 1995, p. 299). Henry's idea that «What more can one want?» than an «exquisite» experience which «leaves one unsatisfied» (Gillespie 2007, p. 68) is investigated through Dorian's desire to lose himself in consumerism, as despite the 'exquisite' quality of the precious treasures he collects, he still feels ultimately restless and unfulfilled.

It is important to stress how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflects the period's fascination with objects from around the world and for «sensations that would be at once new and delightful, and possess that element of strangeness that is so essential to romance» (p. 109); the novel features memorable descriptions such as those of «the dainty Delhi muslins, finely wrought with gold-thread palmates, and stitched over with iridescent beetles' wings; the Dacca gauzes, that from their transparency are known in the East as 'woven air', and 'running water', and 'evening dew', [...] books bound in tawny satins or fair blue silks, and wrought with *fleurs de lys*» (p. 116). The stage directions of some of his scripts also signal the author's interest in eccentric and exotic objects, as exemplified by the first act of *An Ideal Husband*, whose stage directions include references to «a great chandelier with wax lights which illumine a large eighteenth-century French tapestry representing the Triumph of Love, from a design by Boucher» (Wilde 1997b, p. 593) which seems to refer to the decadence of Sir Robert Chiltern's house. The specificity of the «large eighteenth century French tapestry representing the Triumph of Love from a design by Boucher [and] a Louis Seize sofa» not only indicates the social position and wealth of the characters, but also refers to the specificity of the upper-classes' artistic preferences, according to an aesthetic taste in which the author juxtaposes ornate rococo-style with a neo-classical one.

Besides using very old and often precious pieces of furniture, Wilde also commissioned several late Victorian artists and tailors to create contemporary works and dresses to make sure the stage was adorned with fashionable clothing and furniture. This was a significant choice, which gave his plays a fresh sense of style, as the visual dimension of his productions reflected the trends of the time. Interestingly, the playbills for the productions drew attention to the large number of people and companies involved in these areas, indeed, they «advertised the names of the interior designers (for the sets), for example, Walter Hann» and detailed that the «furniture and draperies were provided by Frank Giles, & Co., Kensington, [...] the dresses by Mesdames Savage and Purdue [and] the floral decorations [...] from Harrod's Stores» (Fortunato 2007, p. 96). Wilde's engagement with advertising and marketing reflects his relationship with the consumerist

culture of the day, as his affiliation with such high-class partnerships and organisations nourished the popularity and success of his plays through their joint promotion with such renown brands.

Wilde's plays functioned in brief as a contemporary showcase for the latest trends in fashion and interior design. Paul Fortunato highlights in particular the centrality of the fan in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892): the fan was a very fashionable consumer item at the late Victorian context, indeed, «in the fashion magazines, there were full illustrations of the dresses of the leading female characters in the play [such as Mrs Erlynne] and there were fine illustrations also of the enormous ostrich feather fan» (p. 95). Wilde was, in short, engaged in a very complex dialogue with the latest fashions of his time; if on the one side his plays were nourished by these very trends, on the other his art was able to activate new processes, to introduce new ideas and symbols which were in a sense 'appropriated' by the fashion market, in order to be sold to the mass audience. Interestingly, Rossetti, a major influence on Wilde, had achieved something similar in painting. Wilde himself had written in «The Decay of Lying» on how «a great artist invents a type, and life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in popular form, like an enterprising publisher» (Wilde 1997c, p. 933).

In this very essay the author focuses on the centrality of style in his (consumerist) aesthetics, stating that «it is style that makes us believe in a thing - nothing but style» (Wilde 1997c, p. 940); it is, in short, not the real thing that matters to the person, either as consumer or artist, it is the admixture of style that the artist has infused in the thing. Wilde anticipates in this way some basic assumptions emerging in the area of Cultural Studies between the 1970s and the 1980s from Hebdige's subcultural theory to Chambers' concept of lifestyle. Wilde understood how commodities could become vehicles of individual expression and of self-definition of identity.

Wilde's project had of course its 'political' implications. The author's intention was to present his consumerist aesthetics in terms of discourses of the irrational and the Oriental, capable of decentring the rationalist, Western subject. In this sense, Fortunato (2013) mentions a major work by Wilde, namely *An Ideal Husband* (1895), focusing on a significant exchange between Sir Robert Chiltern and 'the woman of fashion', Mrs Cheveley:

MRS. CHEVELEY: [Optimism and pessimism] are both of them merely poses.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: You prefer to be natural?

MRS. CHEVELEY: Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: What would those modern psychological novelists, of whom we hear so much, say to such a theory as that?

MRS. CHEVELEY: Ah! The strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us. Men can be analyzed, women...merely adored.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: You think science cannot grapple with the problem of women?

MRS. CHEVELEY: Science can never grapple with the irrational. That is why it has no future before it, in this world.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: And women represent the irrational.

MRS. CHEVELEY: Well-dressed women do. (Wilde 1997b, p. 597)

Here Mrs Chevely introduces a number of binary oppositions (to be natural/to pose, rational/irrational) in order to question them to the extent of seeing one as an extension of the other; like Wilde she conceives life as a performance and resolves the opposition rational/irrational by pointing to a conception of reason which is centred on the body – that is, both on physical beauty and bodily needs – and which gives value to the ‘cultural’, that is the performative possibilities offered by consumerism. In this play as elsewhere, Wilde seems to be theorizing the positive, creative aspect of art’s link to consumer culture. When Mrs Cheveley specifies that «well-dressed» women represent the irrational, Wilde implies that the artist and the person of fashion are interested in the very same thing – representing an object (in the case of the woman, herself) not in an accurate flat-footed mode, but rather in a stylish, somehow distorted mode; interestingly, it is the very fact that women-of-fashion are commodified (that is «well-dressed») that gives them power. Mrs Cheveley becomes, in this perspective, a woman who is not afraid of commodity culture, to the extent of embracing its irrational ‘logic’.

In short, consumer culture is not only concerned with commodities, and with their value in a given market; consumerism always implies the emergence of specific lifestyles and the staging of very complex (context-bound) performances by social actors.

4 Coda: The Importance of ‘Being’ Oscar

Wilde’s was a theatre that pointed to the centrality of the ‘dramatic’ aspects of everyday life. As we have seen, his own performance was part of his «self-promotion, which fed his professionalism» (Waldrep 2004, p. 689); Wilde, had a theatrical sense of life, his was a dialogical interiority (Holquist 1981) in which, as in a play, different personae spoke to each other without ever reaching a fixed, immutable truth (or identity).

Although the relevance of the plays we have already mentioned, namely *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, is unquestionable, Wilde’s most successful play of the 1890s remains *The Importance of Being Ear-*

nest (1895) which, in a sense, mirrors 'Oscar Wilde' as a living play with its focus on masks, double identities, inversion of gender roles and verbal complexities. The very title of the play refers to the idea of performance, to the importance of being, playing, performing someone else in particular contexts. Yet this is also a permanent condition: we are the differences, the different roles which we enact every day. In this sense, the play exceeds the page and the (theatrical) stage: the importance of being Earnest turns into the importance of being Oscar which again becomes the symbol of life as theatre and of an ironic approach to identity. The play reflects Wilde's interest in gender issues, questioning, once again, within a consumerist context, the normative and rational aspects of Victorian masculinity, focusing not so much on women's «irrationality» (as was the case with *An Ideal Husband*) as on men's queerness, expanding in a sense the work he had done elaborating the character of the dandy (namely, Lord Goring) in the play written a few months before. In Waldrep's view, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

like the post prison work has a typological function only to the extent to which it acts as an expression of Wilde's own interest of discovering the possibilities in himself. If *Dorian Gray* represented in the characters of Basil, Harry and Dorian - the splitting of his consciousness into three separate versions of himself, then Earnest carries his self into the arena of pure concept. It represents a world where queer space is not merely hinted but explicitly defined. (Waldrep 2004, p. 60)

The queerness at the heart of Earnest (and indirectly) of Wilde has sometimes been over-simplified. The play, according to some scholars, contains a clear homosexual politics and subtext. Sloan stresses how:

Jack and Algernon both pretend to be Earnest in order to maintain a double life. Algernon's special term for this - 'Bunburying' - has also been credited as another coded word for homosexual desire, a play on the slang word 'bun' for 'buttocks'. (Sloan 2003, p. 118)

Even without taking into account such readings, the relevance of the play still lies in the 'Oriental' and irrational subversion of rigidly conventional Victorian attitudes to gender and sexuality. Such attitudes are exemplified by the character of Gwendolen, who often acts and speaks against accepted norms concerning female behavior. In short, as Waldrep puts it, «*Earnest* is a performance about performance, as it is only by performing a gender - or a sexuality - via the use of masks and language that one can begin to manipulate and change the status quo» (Waldrep 2004, p. 59). And this brings us to the complex issue of Wilde's personal performance of gender.

As we have seen, there has been a general trend in twentieth century criticism to consider Wilde as the first gay martyr. For many, the trials which found Wilde guilty and gave him two years of hard labor coincided with the advent of a public homosexuality. In truth, Wilde's was an attempt to construct an alternative discourse on masculinity, which sharply contrasted with the rational, Western, imperial one so fashionable in Victorian England. As Alan Sinfield notices:

Wilde's principal male characters do look and sound like the mid-twentieth century stereotype of the queer man. They are effete, camp, leisured or aspiring to be, aesthetic, amoral, witty, insouciant, charming, spiteful dandified. If these characters are not offered as homosexual (and generally they are pursuing women characters), the whole ambience reeks, none the less, of queerness. Or rather, it does for us. And so does Wilde himself. (Sinfield 1994, p. vi)

Sinfield notes how Wilde's contemporaries «didn't see queerness in the way we have come to see it. [...] Wilde was perceived as effeminate, to be sure; but not thereby as queer» (p. vii). The term effeminacy, up until Wilde, did not mean being womanish, and consequently desiring men, but rather spending too much time 'on' and 'with' women, and consequently not being sufficiently occupied with proper manly pursuits. As we have seen Wilde was obsessed with fashion and interior design and he adored stars such as Sarah Bernhardt and Lillie Langtree, who, in their time, were the equivalent of today's pop celebrities; most importantly, in 1887 Wilde became editor of *The Woman's World* which, thanks to contributions from prominent women writers, activists and actresses, tried to change conventional attitudes to women's history and women's life. In short Wilde was displaying and supporting effeminacy in ways potentially threatening to the establishment.

In an article entitled «The Bi-Social Oscar Wilde and 'Modern' Women», Stetz (2001) shows how Wilde was capable of moving freely between male and female environments; he regularly attended universities, offices, clubs but also women's drawing rooms and workplaces, as we have already affirmed Wilde's most interesting feature is undoubtedly his liminality, his ability never to take sides, his refusal of a fixed, predictable, frame of mind, in short, his resistance to the irreconcilability of contradictory realities (see Eagleton 2001).

In *Masculinity and Culture*, John Beynon contrasts Wilde with Eugene Sandow, who in the 1890s, began to publish books on physical training which attracted a considerable readership. Whereas Sandow «stood for normal masculinity and the improvement of the national and racial stock Wilde represented the abnormal and was the living embodiment of the debauched» (Beynon 2002, p. 44). In this sense, Wilde's humiliation was

often considered as a victory for imperial masculinity and, by implication, for national and imperial health. Yet the twentieth century will witness the crisis of the British Empire and of the kind of masculinity associated with it. Paradoxically the defeat of Wilde implies the defeat of the Empire and the full emergence of Wilde's legacy, and in particular of Oscar's performative paradigm of masculinity as something capable of questioning the Victorian heavily normative approach to gender. As Joseph Bristow observes:

Although [Wilde] expired a month before the beginning of the century that eagerly embraced his controversial legacy, Wilde's achievements – ones that regularly unsettled some of his more conservative-minded contemporaries – would prove to be sources of inspiration for such diverse developments as franker depiction of marital discord on the English stage, campaigns for homosexual rights, the emergence of the culture of celebrity, critical methodologies that champion «the birth of the reader», and modern obsessions with the figure of the beautiful, though fatal young man. (Bristow 2008, p. xii)

As the first proper celebrity of the modern age, Wilde articulated an extremely complex consumerist aesthetics, which conveyed centrality to performance and style. Wilde's impure aesthetics seems to be one of the most relevant legacies of late Victorian culture, to which postmodernity itself – as we have come to know it, with its 'taste' for bricolage and the mixing of high and low cultures – is heavily indebted.

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