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Oscar Wilde in America: Then and Now

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Abstract:

The present article reconceptualizes Oscar Wilde as one of the first modern celebrities, arguing that his 1882 American tour – organized by Richard D'Oyly Carte to promote the operetta *Patience: or, Bunthorne's Bride* (1881) – established a new model of performative authorship grounded in spectacle, mediation, and self-fashioning. Through lectures, interviews, costume, and photography, Wilde transformed the writer into a reproducible cultural surface, pre-announcing modern celebrity culture. The essay situates this American moment as foundational to Wilde's transhistorical afterlife in American popular culture. It examines his intermedial legacy in cinema and contemporary performance art, with particular attention to Al Pacino's docu-film *Wilde Salomè*, which stages a modern cinema star's identification with Wilde. The article further traces Wilde's negotiated presence through figures such as Andy Warhol, Lou Reed, and Patti Smith, arguing that Wilde's aestheticism functions as transferable "social energy" across media and generations. Wilde thus emerges not simply as a Victorian author, but as a foundational architect of American pop modernity.

Keywords: America, Cinema, Music, Performance, Wilde

1. Intro: Oscar Wilde and American Cinema

As the American scholar – and specialist in Decadence Studies – David Weir observes “the best illustration of the pop-culture afterlife of decadence has to be the remarkable posthumous career of Oscar Wilde who died in 1900” (2018, 110). Weir draws attention to the striking fact that “the online Internet Movie Database (IMDb) lists Wilde as ‘screenwriter’ of roughly 250 films, almost 100 more than those credited to Ben Hecht, possibly the most prolific screenwriter in cinema history” (*ibidem*). A significant number of these credits are for “film adaptations of his stage plays, which were extremely popular in his own day. Moreover, film versions of Wilde's plays span the entirety of cinema history, from silent era to the present” (Weir 2018, 110).

Wilde's influence on cinema, and on American cinema in particular, cannot, however, be confined to film adaptations of his works alone as indeed Kate Hext has brilliantly shown in her recent book entitled *Wilde in the Dream Factory: Decadence and the American Movies*:

Wilde's larger presence in American pictures [...] was established from the industry's beginning. [...] To this emerging movie world, Wilde's star potential was clear. He had always been a countercultural force and on-screen it would be no different [...] Some of the industry's biggest names [...] translated Wilde's characters, motifs, and wit into original screenplays across a range of genres from the first gangster films, B-movie horrors, and films noirs, to screwball comedies and big-budget musicals. As they did so, they helped create the image of Wilde we have today: as naughty, audacious, modern. (Hext 2024, xv-xvi)

This essay argues that Wilde's relationship with America is not merely an episode in his biography, nor simply a story of transatlantic reception. Rather, Wilde inaugurates in the United States a new model of performative authorship – one in which the writer/artist becomes spectacle, commodity, and media construct. His 1882 American tour did not simply make him famous; it established a template for modern celebrity culture grounded in self-fashioning, theatricality, serial self-reproduction, and strategic engagement with the press. In this sense, Wilde emerges not only as a precursor of Hollywood but as one of the earliest architects of what would become American pop modernity.

A fascinating example is the American director/actor and pop celebrity Al Pacino, who alongside creating some of the most iconic (“naughty and audacious”, Hext 2024, xvi) characters in the history of cinema is also a devoted admirer of Wilde. Pacino's 2011 celebrated docufilm *Wilde Salomè* documents a period in which Pacino performed in a production of *Salomè* directed by actress and theatre director Estelle Parson at Los Angeles' Wadsworth Theatre – playing the role of Herod with Jessica Chastain in the role of Salomè – while he was also making a movie documenting the mounting of the show, and shooting a narrative film version of the play. The Los Angeles performance was actually a staged-reading in modern dress, with no musical accompaniment, a choice which surprised both audience and critics, but which – as Al Pacino explains in the film – allowed the audience to become entranced by Wilde's own *music*, by the “magic”, of his words. Indeed, *Salomè* is arguably the most sonorous and overtly musical of Wilde's works.

For Al Pacino – and, by extension, for the audience – the film constitutes both a journey and, more significantly, an ongoing process. As he acknowledges in the opening sequences, it becomes an undertaking through which he effectively rewrites not only the play, but Wilde himself. *Wilde-Salomè* thus stages Pacino's self-declared “love affair with Oscar Wilde” – an author he professes to admire for his “fragile power” – while simultaneously articulating his own desire to interrogate Wilde's afterlife within contemporary culture (Martino 2023). In a manner that recalls his engagement with Shakespeare in the 1996 docudrama *Looking for Richard*, Pacino adopts a quasi-investigative approach, travelling to major cultural capitals – London, Dublin, Paris, and New York – in order to cast light on the historical and aesthetic contexts of Wilde's work, and to develop a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which *Salomè* was conceived. In a sense, the sequences depicting Wilde and his milieu constitute a *film within the film* – a biopic nested within the broader framework of the Los Angeles rehearsals and performance footage.

In order to investigate Wilde's complexity and multiplicity, Al Pacino stages fascinating dialogues with several writers and celebrities linked, in different and at times unpredictable ways, to Wilde's world. Alongside Wilde's nephew Merlin Holland who provides biographical details and acute observations about Wilde as an uncomfortable figure within Victorian society, we have American intellectual Gore Vidal referring to Wilde – who in his opinion is the

author of the first ever play “on nothing”, namely *The Importance of Being Earnest* – in terms of one of the early socialists and a sharp political thinker, something that explains why he was imprisoned in Reading Gaol; as Vidal insists, the English government “feared him not for sex but feared him for his ideas” (Bracewell 1997).

The film also includes a significant contribution from Tom Stoppard¹, who, in addition to recounting details about Wilde being accused of posing as a *so(m)domite* on the infamous card written by Queensberry, interprets Wilde’s decision not to leave the country during the famous afternoon at the Cadogan Hotel, as a deliberate act of self-fashioning, signaling his determination to become a martyr for posterity. On the other hand, Irish global celebrity Bono, singer of U2, focuses on Wilde’s universal appeal not just for gay people, but for anyone who feels that their part in their society is being marginalised. Interestingly, Bono – who, in the interview, speaks of Wilde as the only writer who can take on Shakespeare – also points to the character Salomé’s destructive power of sexuality, projecting towards Wilde’s own destiny and fall.

The most fascinating sequences of the film, however, are those in which Pacino enacts pivotal episodes from the author’s life. If in Dublin we see him visiting Wilde’s birthplace and the National Gallery of Ireland (featuring paintings of both Salomé and John the Baptist), saluting Wilde’s memorial sculpture in Merrion Square, saying “we love you for everything you’ve given us and we will continue to”; some minutes later we watch him performing Wilde in London’s Cadogan Hotel room, with two actors from his company in the roles of Ross and Bosie.

Subsequently – after observing him visit Wilde’s London house in Tite Street and other sites associated with the author – Pacino reads passages from *De Profundis* and “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”, affirming how the real irony is that the prison informs the two works which are considered his best. Interestingly, the prison section of the film hosts a number of sequences from Gilbert’s 1997 biopic *Wilde*, staging a form of intertextuality which points to Wilde’s complex intermedial position within contemporary popular culture.

One of the most compelling – and, to some extent, moving – sequences of the film occurs when Pacino acknowledges his personal debt to Wilde. “You marry”, he observes, “your favourite writer”, and in doing so become “half of each other”. In the final part of the docufilm, Pacino is shown on a train, a sequence that not only visually embodies the notion of the film as a journey but also acquires particular resonance through the interplay of *Salomé*’s symphonic yet dramatic conclusion with Wilde’s iconic lines from “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”: “Each man kills the thing he loves”, which Pacino delivers with extraordinary intensity. In the very last scene of the film, we have Pacino in a desert, giving voice to Wilde through the famous lines from *De Profundis* in which Wilde affirms that “All trials are trials for one’s life, just as all sentences are sentences of death”. What we have in *Wilde Salomé* is, indeed, a modern celebrity investigating the life of the first real pop celebrity in the history of modern literature. More specifically, we have an American film star investigating the success of a writer who became *big* in America first and then in Britain.

Some of America’s most prominent cultural figures, meanwhile, have engaged with Wilde and his world in one way or another, including Andy Warhol, Lou Reed, and Truman Capote. Interestingly, Waldrep observes that Truman Capote – author of the *novella* *Breakfast at Tiffany* (1958), which was adapted into one of the most iconic films in the history of American cinema (directed by Blake Edwards in 1961) –, as a talented journalist and “in his performance of the role of serious writer [...] paralleled Wilde in his use of self-promotion and the ability to

¹ Stoppard’s 1974 play *Travesties* interestingly focuses on Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

sell himself” (2004, 79). Capote shared Wilde’s conversation skills, arguing that “great conversationalists are in fact really monologists, and illustrated this principle via the televised talk show” (81). Like Wilde, Capote thought of his self *as theatre*, something which emerges in his extraordinary self-interview entitled “Nocturnal Turnings” – included in the collection *Music for Chameleons* (1980) – in which he investigates his many sides: the alcoholic, the genius, the drug addict and the homosexual, in a way which recalls Wilde’s writing in *De Profundis*.

2. Then: Wilde’s American tour and the making of an international celebrity

Wilde became an international celebrity during his 1882 tour of the United States; like any contemporary pop star, in order to become a proper celebrity, he first needed to be *big* in America. The opportunity arose from 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; as Ellmann observes:

[Richard D’Oyly Carte] was particularly willing to bring over the purported model for Bunthorne because Americans had little direct information about the type, and no history of the mockery of it such as du Maurier’s. Of course, the United States had a subculture which was dissatisfied with money and power, but this had no single and famed exponent. Neither the shirt-sleeved Whitman, nor the bearded Longfellow, nor the tense Emerson could remotely be thought of as Gilbert’s model. (1987, 144)

It is worth noting that Wilde’s American tour has been at the centre of several recent analyses, especially by American scholars such as Roy Morris, Joy Shannon and David. M. Friedman, commenting on a very prolific and attractive area of Wilde Studies. Interestingly, major Wilde scholars of the last 50 years are American, from Richard Ellmann to Michael Gillespie, from Shelton Waldrep to Michael Davis.

Wilde’s American tour² pre-dates a practice that would become widespread in the 1960s, when British rock and pop artists, such as the Beatles, promoted their albums through extended tours of the United States (Martino 2023). Significantly, Wilde did not associate his name with the high art of Lyric Opera, but rather with operetta, a form of middle-brow entertainment. In this sense, he undertook a kind of “pop tour” before the advent of pop itself, in a process in which the operetta served to publicize Wilde, rather than the other way around.

Wilde’s American performances involved both sound and vision. Legend has it 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, 1)³. 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, 66).

Indeed, Wilde’s speech was music; he was a master improviser who understood that engaging in society – that is, in any form of social interaction – is, in Schutz’s terms, akin to “playing music

² Key studies on the American tour include: Morris 2013; Friedman 2014; Mendelssohn 2018.

³ Wilde famously said, in an epigram addressed to André Gide, to have put “all his genius into his life and only his talent in his works”.

together" (Schutz 1976). In this musical performance, in which he blended different genres (stories, philosophy, wit), very often form becomes more relevant than content. Wilde's epigrams⁴, which he would effortlessly insert into his speeches with the same elegance and cool of his characters on the stage, were in a sense the melody around which he improvised in different contexts.

The young dandy, intent on becoming a star, prepared meticulously for his American tour, paying close attention to his attire and commissioning costumes from his tailor. Contemporary accounts of his early appearances in the United States recall his green overcoat and Polish cap. Most significantly, hundreds of photographs were taken of the aesthete striking various poses during the tour. Among these, the famous Sarony portraits – depicting Wilde in a characteristic costume for the American tour, complete with velveteen jacket, knee breeches, and his iconic long hair – capture not only his distinctive appearance but also his remarkable capacity for self-promotion. As Kerry Powell observes "celebrity images had market value, then as now", but:

Sarony's portraits were also distinguished by a lifelike spontaneity unusual for the time – a variety of poses, gestures and expressions that made his work stand out from the dull sameness of most photography. Notwithstanding the long exposure times of up to a full minute, Sarony was able to avoid the stiff, wooden poses that make the photographs of most of his contemporaries seem so unlikable. (Powell 2009, 21-22)

Interestingly, in his sessions with Wilde, "posing the sitter was Sarony's primary function [...] and by all accounts he was meticulous, demanding and even tyrannical in doing it". Like Basil Hallward in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "Sarony seemed actually to project himself into the poses of his subjects" (22). Once again in Wilde's American tour, life was imitating art, even though, it is worth noting that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was to be published some eight years later.

Wilde's careful orchestration of his public image may also be read, retrospectively, through the lens of Debord's analysis of modern visual culture. In thesis 6 of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Debord argues that the spectacle is not merely a collection of images but "a social relation among people, mediated by images" (Debord 2014, 2). Long before the full emergence of twentieth-century mass media, Wilde seems intuitively to grasp this dynamic. His lectures, interviews, costumes, and especially his photographic portraits did not simply represent him; they constituted the very medium through which his relation to the American public was organized. The "real-life aesthete" promised by D'Oyly Carte was already a mediated construct, a carefully stylized surface circulating through newspapers, cartes-de-visite, and illustrated magazines. In this sense, Wilde's American tour looks towards a culture in which personality becomes inseparable from its visual reproducibility, and in which fame depends upon the strategic management of appearance.

Wilde was acutely 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, 147). Moreover, having never delivered a lecture before, he sought guidance after finalising his agreement with the Carte organisation, from Hermann Vezin, an American actor and drama critic then working in London – who had previously collaborated with John Hare and Charles Kean, among others – for elocution and gesture lessons (Friedman 2014, 51). Wilde prepared his first lecture in America, probably waiting to measure the cultural temperature before doing so. The first of the

⁴ A 2004 documentary entitled *Happy Birthday Oscar Wilde* directed by Bill Hughes for Wilde's 150th birth anniversary celebrates the epigrammatic dimension of his work. Among those performing his epigrams we have Bono, Gavin Friday, Annie Lennox, Gabriel Byrne, Geoffrey Rush and Liam Neeson.

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”, to which he later added a fourth lecture entitled “The Irish poets of 1848”.

In “The English Renaissance of Art”, Wilde advanced a reconsidered notion of aestheticism, one in which his own aesthetic taste can be understood as necessarily impure. It is well known that in *Économimesis*, Derrida (1981) offers a reading of Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment in *The Critique of Judgment*, demonstrating how the idealist framing of the aesthetic as an ontological question – with its implicit emphasis on purity – necessarily excludes attention to the material and historical forces that continually shape representational practices and aesthetic experience. Wilde was acutely aware of these forces and calibrated his aesthetics accordingly. In this sense, his discourse was capable of reconciling, or more precisely *harmonising*, complex dichotomies such as body and soul, external and internal, in a highly sophisticated and intelligent manner.

It is essential to recall that Wilde’s conception of beauty emerged from a complex process of harmonization of the aesthetic doctrines of his two mentors, namely Ruskin and Pater – even though Wilde’s mature thought ultimately reveals a more substantial debt to Pater. For Ruskin beauty was inextricably linked to moral goodness, 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 contextual experience.

Wilde’s capacity to synthesize divergent – even antithetical – perspectives lent considerable force and originality to the ideas he advanced during his American tour. The opening section of his first lecture represents a remarkable literary *performance*, in which the author juxtaposes and harmonises a multiplicity of voices and visions:

Among the many debts which we owe to the supreme aesthetic faculty of Goethe is that he was the first to teach us to define beauty in terms the most concrete possible, to realise it, I mean, always in its special manifestations. So, in the lecture which I have the honour to deliver before you, I will not try to give you any abstract definition of beauty – any such universal formula for it as was sought for by the philosophy of the eighteenth century – still less to communicate to you that which in its essence is incommunicable, the virtue by which a particular picture or poem affects us with a unique and special joy; but rather to point out to you the general ideas which characterise the great English Renaissance of Art in this century, to discover their source, as far as that is possible, and to estimate their future as far as that is possible. I call it our English Renaissance because it is indeed a sort of new birth of the spirit of man, like the great Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century, in its desire for a more gracious and comely way of life, its passion for physical beauty, its exclusive attention to form, its seeking for new subjects for poetry, new forms of art, new intellectual and imaginative enjoyments: and I call it our romantic movement because it is our most recent expression of beauty. (Wilde 1913, 111-112)

Commenting on “The English Renaissance of Art”, Ellmann observes, with characteristic elegance, that “by beautifying the outward aspects of life, [Wilde] would beautify the inner ones” (1987, 157), and adds that here Wilde would 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. (157-158)

The lecture – conceived as a powerful script and brilliantly performed by Wilde in his theatrical Dandy persona across various American stages – was first delivered in New York on 9 January. Records and eye-witness accounts recount how Wilde captivated his audience not only through the content of his address but also through his striking attire and highly distinctive mode of delivery. His costume consisted of a dark purple coat and knee breeches, black hose, and low shoes adorned with bright buckles; the coat was lined with lavender satin, and rich lace frills appeared at the wrists and as tie-ends over a low turn-down collar. His hair was worn long, either parted in the middle or combed over. He entered the stage draped in a circular cavalier cloak, and his voice – clear, effortless, and unforced – was accompanied by measured shifts in posture, the head occasionally inclined toward the supporting foot, maintaining throughout an overall impression of composure and repose.

What Wilde succeeded in presenting – and, indeed, in selling – was not so much a set of precepts as a carefully fashioned personality. Stern has recently reconsidered the American tour in light of Wilde's commitment to aesthetic education, interpreting his costume as a "deliberate study in pedagogical style" (2019, 59). As Stern observes,

by approaching the task of lecturing as a kind of performance, Wilde wished to do more than simply profess truths about art: inspired by the examples of Mahaffy and Ruskin, he visibly embodied the figure of teacher as artist. His audiences would not merely imbibe his lessons; they would see those ideas manifested in the flesh. (*Ibidem*)

Wilde's personality and performances soon became the object of intense and often polarized debate as he traversed the United States on a demanding tour that continued until 27 December. Many took his proclaimed mission "to make this artistic movement the basis for a new civilization" to heart (Hofer and Scharnhorst 2010, 99), and in his wake craft societies flourished and museum patronage expanded. In letters home, Wilde exulted that he was a greater genius than Dickens; such personal adulation, he claimed, necessitated the employment of three secretaries. As he wryly remarked, "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" (Wilde 2000, 126).

On 18 January Wilde met Walt Whitman. Having previously praised Whitman's work in the local press, Wilde sought an introduction, and after some initial hesitation the older poet agreed to receive him. Their conversation, which centered on contemporary poetry and the so-called aesthetic school, reportedly grew tense when Wilde declared that he could not attend to any writer who failed to attract him through charm of style or beauty of subject. Whitman objected that one who pursues beauty as an end in itself is "in a bad way", maintaining that beauty is a consequence rather than an abstraction. Wilde responded with characteristic flexibility, professing agreement (Friedman 2014). Wilde was fascinated by the Whitman of *Leaves of Grass*, who famously proclaimed: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then I contradict myself, / I am large, I contain multitudes" (Whitman 2009, 103). This celebration of multiplicity offers a suggestive parallel to Wilde's own self-fashioning. The Whitmanian idea of plural identity has continued to resonate across generations of American culture: Nobel Prize (for literature) winner Bob Dylan – often regarded as a disciple, in different ways, of both Whitman and Wilde – significantly titled the opening track of his 2020 album *Rough and Rowdy Ways* "I Contain Multitudes". Similarly, Todd Haynes's film *I'm Not There*, which explores Dylan through a series of fragmented and multiple personae,

approaches artistic identity as an *assemblage* of selves – an interpretative framework based on the notion of multiplicity that also invites comparison with Wilde’s performative and protean conception and projection of self/selves.

A few weeks after his arrival in New York, Wilde recognized the need to deliver an additional lecture alongside “The English Renaissance of Art” and consequently composed not one but two new lectures: “The Decorative Arts” and “The House Beautiful”. The former was closely connected to “The English Renaissance”, drawing extensively on the examples of Ruskin and William Morris. In “The Decorative Arts” – which was first presented in Chicago, with Wilde moving “fluently from point to point, not worrying much about organization, trusting to what quickly became dependable patter” (Ellmann 1987, 183)⁵ – the author famously declared that “All great art is decorative, but that not all decoration is art” (Friedman 2014, 160):

To illustrate that [...] point, [...] Wilde disdained the then-current American fashion for painting sunsets and other natural phenomena on china [...] he said [sunsets] ‘if beautiful enough should be painted [on canvas], handsomely framed and hung on walls’ [...] Wilde then went on to declare that virtually nothing made by a machine could qualify as beautiful; that art is the result less of exuberant feeling than of excellent technique; that art schools should be housed in elegant buildings; and that craftsmen are more likely to produce beautiful things when surrounded by beautiful things themselves. Even the *Tribune* acknowledged that these teachings were received by an ‘orderly and appreciative’ crowd that presents ‘not the slightest suggestion of rowdiness or ridicule’. (*Ibidem*)⁶

The second lecture he added, “The House Beautiful”, was even more prescriptive. As Morris notes, it constituted a “top-to-bottom survey of modern houses and, most particularly, their furnishings” (2013, 124). In this lecture, Wilde’s performative abilities – his theatrical enunciation – proved, more than in other cases, to be of paramount importance, complemented by his gestures, as he “metaphorically walked through ‘the house commenting on the mistakes he had observed’” (Friedman 2014, 183-184). Wilde’s recommendations were notably precise and exacting:

Within the house: the hall should not be papered, since the walls are exposed more or less to the elements by the frequent opening and closing of the door, it could be wainscoted with some of America’s beautiful woods [...]. Don’t carpet the floor: ordinary red bricks tiles make a warm and beautiful floor [...]. Colours resemble musical notes: a single false colour or false note destroys the whole. Therefore, in decorating a room one keynote of colour should predominate. [...] On the walls secondary colours should be used [...] Don’t paper [the ceiling]; that gives one the sensation of living in a paper box, which is not pleasant. [...] As regards style of furniture, [the] most liked in England, and the one which is most suitable in every way for you, is that known as Queen Anne furniture. (Wilde 1994, 915-916)

After offering observations on the presence and placement of a piano in the home, as well as on the importance of flowers – and after providing guidance on the manner of dress for both men and women residing there – Wilde emphasizes that “today more than ever the artist and a love of the beautiful are needed to temper and counteract the sordid materialism of the age” concluding that “there is nothing in common life too mean, in common things too trivial, to be ennobled by your touch, nothing in life that art cannot raise or sanctify” (925).

⁵ Focusing on Wilde’s second lecture Ellmann writes: “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” (1987, 183).

⁶ Interestingly Wilde, while objecting to machine-made articles, allowed that machinery could in some ways free people for better use of time.

A fourth lecture entitled “The Irish Poets of 1848” was first delivered in San Francisco at the end of March and subsequently in several other cities. In it, Wilde focused on nineteenth-century Irish figures such as William Smith O’Brien, John Mitchel, Charles Gavan Duffy, Thomas Davis, James Clarence Mangan, and, notably, his mother, Speranza, who had instilled in the young Oscar “a love and reverence” for the poets of ’48. As Mendelssohn observes, in discussing these figures Wilde was obliquely “addressing the explosive situation playing out in real time back home” (2018, 177), without explicitly referencing contemporary leaders such as Parnell and Davitt; in this sense,

[Wilde’s lecture] by drawing historical parallels, he reframed current events in Ireland as part of a vast, cosmopolitan panorama of world events unfurling across time and space. By these lights he reckoned that the Celtic imagination was responsible for ‘all the great beauties of modern literature’ in Europe. Its ‘chords of penetrating passion and melancholy had touched ‘men so widely different as Goethe and Napoleon, influencing the work of many poets, from Byron to Keats and Lamartine’ [...] Diverting the conversation from Celts to cosmopolitans, deflecting from the present to the past, from this to that, from X to Y – these manoeuvres were to become his lifelong strategy for discussing topics that were personal emotional, or controversial. (177-178)

The tour was undoubtedly a success and in his correspondence with friends at home Wilde recounted some of its most memorable episodes. Recalling a lecture 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” (Wilde 2000, 161). On this occasion, Wilde also descended – much to the delight of his audience – to the bottom of a silver mine in a bucket, where he dined, drank whiskey, and smoked a cigar, all as a prelude to the main event:

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. (162)

While in the bar that same evening, surrounded by miners and their female companions, Wilde noticed a sign reading, “Please don’t shoot the pianist; he is doing his best”, which he later described in his short essay *Impressions of America*, as “the only rational method of art criticism he had ever come across” (Wilde 1906, 31). Back in England, he recalled this with evident delight; writing: “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, 226).

3. Now: Wilde’s afterlife in America

Wilde was an easy, if not eager target in America. A few mocked his poetry and 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 style and if a few newspapers took his side, most tried to make him look foolish. Particularly, 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*, but good or bad press was, for Wilde, secondary to his aim of being the news, inhabiting the story, occupying the space.

It must be emphasized that for Wilde newspapers primarily represented opportunities for interviews, which constituted a highly valuable platform for the cultivation of his celebrity. During his 1882 North American tour he sat for at least 176 interviews (Marland 2022), each of which he approached as a carefully staged performance in its own right. As Hofer and Scharnhorst observe:

Wilde often conducted an interview as if it were a performance. 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, interrupt the talk, and explain that the poet had another appointment. (2010, 4)

Here again, Wilde appears strikingly modern: the interview becomes a staged event in which visibility itself is the commodity, exemplifying what Debord would later identify as lived experience being displaced by its spectacular representation. Interviews, as Wilde recognized, were a product of modern American society, useful bridging platforms between popular media – the press and the theatre – whose aim was less to *inform* readers than *form* an image or product to be consumed. Celebrity interviews first emerged in American newspapers in the early 1870s, and traveling lecturers provided a convenient source of material for reporters. While figures such as Henry James and Mark Twain criticized this emerging culture of celebrity – despite Twain himself being a literary celebrity both in America and abroad – Wilde, like Whitman, embraced it, establishing a model of performative self-presentation that would resonate for generations to come. Interviews, in this sense, became a crucial resource in the construction of public personae, a precedent that would be widely exploited by twentieth-century celebrities.

As Rob Marland, editor of *Oscar Wilde: The Complete Interviews* (2022), observes “many of Wilde’s American interviewers, who came expecting to meet a buffoon or huckster, were compelled to admit that his conversational powers and the range of his expertise and interests were impressive” (Marland 2022, 14). Indeed, as Hofer and Scharnhorst note:

In his interviews Wilde touched on a wide range of topics, including American architecture, Chinese porcelain, the state of the American theater, Irish Home Rule and the Land League, the American expatriate painter James McNeill Whistler, and his plan to visit Japan and Australia. He freely expressed his opinion of such American writers as Whitman, Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe, and Howells and of such British authors as Milton, Shelley, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, and Tennyson. [...] He was never bereft of opinions, especially irreverent ones. (2010, 4)

It is important to emphasize that, while some newspapers and journalists attacked Wilde, such criticism paradoxically reinforced his confidence. They could ridicule him, but they could not divert public attention from his presence. In this sense, prolonged derision became a form of tribute, enabling Wilde to engage directly with the public, circumventing the gatekeeping role of the press. During his twelve months in America, he honed the art of mocking his mockers – a dynamic that, in many respects, anticipates the mechanisms of contemporary celebrity culture. Much of this was achieved through his epigrams, which, as Eagleton observes, a Wildean epigram “seizes upon some [...] commonplace and rips it inside out, deconstructs it” (2001, 4).

In Greenblatt’s terms, Wilde’s epigrams may be understood as condensed packets of what he calls “social energy”: forms of discourse that circulate through a culture, accumulating, redirecting, and redistributing affective and ideological charge across different contexts (1988). Wilde did not merely produce aphorisms; he released into the public sphere portable

verbal devices capable of moving between lecture hall, newspaper column, drawing-room conversation and later dramatic dialogue. Their power lay precisely in their mobility. Each repetition did not simply reproduce meaning but reactivated and renegotiated it within a new social situation. In this sense, Wilde's American tour becomes a laboratory of circulation, where aestheticism transforms from doctrine into transferable cultural currency.

Wilde – as a man and artist fully immersed in consumer culture – frequently recycled his epigrams across plays, essays and everyday conversation; indeed, as Matthew Sturgis observes:

Wilde's first reputation was as a wit: a sayer of smart things. From his last days at university he was celebrated – or mocked – as master of the ingenious epigram, the provocative paradox, the witty side, or the extravagant conceit. And it was a reputation that endured. Indeed, even after his literary success in the 1890s, it remained a common trope that, however sparkling his writings might be, they were but pallid reflections of his verbal exuberance and wit – or ingenious vehicles for the same. For, if other recorded his conventional flights, so too did Wilde. He used and re-used, many of his sayings in his published works – in his two great 'duologues' ('The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist'), in his one novel, in his four plays, and in the several epigrammatic manifestos that he contributed to the periodical press. (2020, vi)⁷

In this respect, a parallel may be drawn between Wilde and the quintessentially American icon Andy Warhol, himself described as "of the Wilde sort", who "brought seriality to new heights (or depths) by signaling that it was all that art was – indeed, that it could ever be" (Waldrep 2004, 100). Warhol, who famously characterized himself as a "deeply superficial person", treated the trivial as paramount and the paramount as trivial – a sensibility that resonates with Wilde, the author of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play whose subtitle aptly describes it as "A trivial comedy for serious people" (Bockris 1989).

Glick, in her insightful study *Materializing Queer Desire: Oscar Wilde to Andy Warhol*, observes that "Andy Warhol [...] has very much in common with early incarnations of the queer aesthete or dandy such as Oscar Wilde" (2009, 152). As she notes, this connection "was not lost on Warhol's contemporaries", citing the words of art curator and critic Henry Geldzahler – the protagonist of Warhol's eponymous 1964 film – who remarked:

I've written about Andy that only Oscar Wilde, as far as I know, was able to the same extent to invent a way of behaving with people who were at the margin of society. That whole aesthetic, *Yellow Book*, Aubrey Beardsley, Ronald Firbank, was invented by the aesthete Wilde. Andy in the sixties did something like that also, that lifestyle. (Shore, Tillman 1995, 130)

In short, as Glick puts it "like his predecessor Warhol used his effeminacy, aesthetic costume, intimacy with objects and celebrity connections to advertise himself as a highly polished, aesthetic surface" (2009, 152).

A central preoccupation for both Wilde and Warhol was, of course, fame itself. Since his college days, Wilde had known that he would be "famous, and if not famous, notorious" (Ellmann

⁷ Sturgis notes that "there have, over the years, been many anthologies of Wilde's aphorisms. Indeed, he together with his wife, Constance, was responsible for the first collection – called *Oscariana*. [...] Since then the process has never ceased [...]. Certainly, over the decades a definite canon has emerged. The same epigrams have become – repeated, reordered, re-enjoyed" (2020, vi-vii). In a way, the many collections of Wilde's (extraordinarily musical) epigrams published over the years have played the same function that *Best of* or *Greatest Hits* collections of songs by famous pop artists have played in the world (and market) of popular music.

1987, 45), while Warhol – described by Marwick as “the embodiment of spectacle”⁸ – sought to make “being famous more famous” (Lebowitz cited in Waldrep 2004, 97), a strategy that would come to define Warhol Enterprises during the 1980s. As Waldrep observes, in the later part of his career Warhol replaced the artists and outsiders who had populated the Factory in the 1960s – muses such as Edie Sedgwick and Nico, actors such as Joe D’Alessandro and Paul Morrissey, and the avant-rock band The Velvet Underground – with wealthy socialites, celebrities and royals, effectively retreating into the world of the jet set. Significantly, he transformed his renowned magazine *Interview* into a publication “almost wholly about fame”:

The process of becoming famous [was] chronicled either in the one-paged bios of hunky young stars that always began each issue or in the main section, which usually included an interview with the cover star based on a “conversation” at lunch with Andy and either another editor or a friend. Each cover, though rarely by Warhol, expressed the Warhol mystique at that time: a celebrity almost instantly recognizable, is painted in faux-pop style in which the person’s face appears as if on a poster [...]. The iconic treatment of anyone who appeared on the cover also added to the idea that the cover has a ‘star’ each issue. (Waldrep 2004, 97-98)

Wilde himself, as we have seen, sat for numerous interviews during his American tour and his image – albeit often rendered in caricature – appeared on the cover of several magazines.

Among the artists peopling Warhol’s factory in the 1960s there were, of course, The Velvet Underground. Their music embodies a dynamic interplay of light and darkness, love and sorrow, beauty and dissonance – qualities that resonate throughout much of Wilde’s work. Lou Reed’s solo debut album, *Transformer* (1972), features the seminal track “Walk on the Wild Side”, whose narrative of early 1970s transvestitism and homoerotic relationships echoes the fascinating connection – Bracewell identifies (1997) – between the later Oscar Wilde and the London underworld. Yet in Reed’s work, composed in the early 1970s, the “wild side” is not portrayed as a site of danger or criminality, but as a space in which identity, and particularly conceptions of gender, can be reimagined. As Reed’s biographer DeCurtis observes:

‘Walk on the Wild Side’ celebrates the sexual transformations of Holly Woodlawn, Jackie Curtis, and Candy Darling, three transgender Factory stalwarts and the stars of Warhol ad Paul Morrissey’s 1971 satire of the feminist movement, *Women in Revolt*. [...] It’s not as if Reed knew those characters at all [...] ‘Walk on the Wild Side’ is more than a song. It’s a slogan, and an invitation. Its title distils Reed’s primary symbolic value: to expose people to worlds they might never have become aware of otherwise. In the early seventies, millions of people were standing on the brink of taking a walk on the wild. All they needed was a little push, and Reed provided exactly that. (2017, 151-153)

In this context, the “wild side” can also be understood as the “Wilde side”, conceived as a threshold, a liminal, and even “risky” space in which conventional or essentialist notions of identity can be interrogated and reimagined.

Another American artist inhabiting the Wilde side is the poet and singer Patti Smith, who on Sunday, 30 October 2016, delivered a reading of Wilde’s final major prose work, *De Profundis*, in the former Chapel of Reading Gaol. The performance, which lasted over three hours, opened with a striking *a cappella* rendition of her thematically resonant song “Wing”. In 2020, Smith engaged further with Wilde by composing a personal letter – addressed to, and in a sense in dialogue with, Wilde – as the introduction to the Folio special edition of *De*

⁸ Marwick also notes how “Warhol perceived that with conceptual art (and here the term ‘art’ includes his films) you could outrage people and gain enormous publicity through people simply being made aware of the concept, without ever having actually to view the painting, sculpture, or film” (Marwick 2002, 200).

Profundis (2020). With her androgynous presentation and nuanced, committed approach to gender, Smith demonstrates a profound artistic and conceptual indebtedness to Wilde.

Wilde's trans-historical reappearances can be, in this perspective, productively understood through Greenblatt's notion of "negotiation" (1988), whereby literary and cultural texts are not passively inherited but actively reworked within shifting fields of power, desire, and ideology. Wilde's persona does not simply survive; it is renegotiated at each historical juncture. Warhol's aesthetic surface, Reed's "wild side", and later Patti Smith's devotional return to *De Profundis* do not replicate Wilde but enter into a dynamic exchange with him, appropriating certain elements (dandyism, theatricality, queer liminality, epigrammatic defiance) while re-situating them within new cultural struggles. What circulates, therefore, is not a stable Wilde but a flexible repertoire of gestures, poses, and conceptual energies continually adapted to new social formations.

In this sense, in 2009, the Chicago indie band Company of Thieves released a song entitled "Oscar Wilde", which can be read as a Dorian Gray song. Its sound, heavily reminiscent of the late Smiths – particularly of Johnny Marr's distinctive guitar work – complements lyrics that evoke Wildean themes. The song features a line in which the narrator refers to an Oscar Wilde "confrontation" and is populated by imagery that strongly resonates with Wilde's only novel: from allusions to Dorian's double life to the imperative to live as though life itself were a matter of style – a precept likely drawn from Lord Wotton. Commenting on the song's promotional video, Wilde scholar Salamensky observes:

[...] dressed, in a video of the song in a schoolboy uniform, and humorously depicted as 'French Club President,' 'Debate Team Captain,' 'Choirmaster,' 'Kung Fu Club Yellow Belt,' and in other ways "Most Likely to Succeed", (singer) Schatz, like her bandmates, is spirited and bright – undoubtedly someone whom Wilde, were he alive today, would like far more than the dim, dull scholars who read and study his work. (2012, 155)

A folk-infused atmosphere defines the 2015 song "Stars" by the Canadian new-folk band Mahones, whose lyrics are animated and enriched by (deconstructed) Wildean epigrams, including the famous line from *Lady Windermere's Fan*: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars". By contrast, American singer Marchelle Bradanini's 2020 single "Oscar Wilde" is characterized by a sound evocative of Americana artists such as Lucinda Williams and the late Bill Frisell.

Returning to 1882, it is noteworthy that Wilde's American tour began in New York, where he delivered three lectures: the first, "The English Renaissance of the Arts", on 9 January 1882 at Chickering Hall; the second, "The Decorative Arts", on 11 May 1882 at Wallack's Theatre; and a final lecture on 27 November at Parepa Hall in Yorkville, devoted to "The Practical Application of the Principles of Home Decoration, with Observations on Personal Dress and Ornaments". Today, several of the aesthetic principles articulated in these lectures find renewed expression in a contemporary New York cultural space dedicated to the Anglo-Irish writer himself. The Oscar Wilde NYC, a bar and restaurant unique of its kind, is located in the NoMad district at 45 West 27th Street, Manhattan, in a building that formerly housed the headquarters of the Prohibition Enforcement. As stated on its official website, the venue defines itself as "a public place for private affairs" and seeks to embody the spirit of Oscar Wilde by celebrating life through Victorian sophistication and glamour⁹.

⁹ The Oscar Wilde bar in New York exemplifies the contemporary cultural afterlife of Wilde through an immersive aesthetic experience that merges late Victorian decadence with modern urban glamour. Its lavish décor – characterized by marble surfaces, antique objects, mechanical floral installations, and explicit textual references to Wilde's works – transforms the act of dining and drinking into a performative engagement with literary heritage.

We may conclude by echoing Richard Ellmann's observation that Wilde's American tour constituted "an achievement of courage and grace, along with ineptitude and self-advertisement" (1987, 195), through which Wilde successfully naturalized the term aesthetic within American culture. Although his doctrines were often dismissed as effeminate, Ellmann contends that they nonetheless represented the most sustained and incisive critique of materialistic vulgarity that the United States had yet encountered. More importantly, Wilde's aesthetic principles exerted a lasting influence on successive generations of American artists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Wilde's journey across space – from Ireland to England, to the United States, and later to continental Europe – thus becomes a temporal journey, in which his aestheticism operates as transferable social energy, repeatedly negotiated within new historical conjunctures. Musicians such as Lou Reed and Patti Smith, alongside artists, directors, and actors including Andy Warhol and Al Pacino, demonstrate a keen awareness of the significance of "being" or "playing" Oscar within their respective cultural contexts, revealing Wilde as a subversive and critical figure whose persona can be productively performed and reimagined – perhaps now more than ever.

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Quotations from Wilde's corpus, statues dedicated to the author, and themed cocktails contribute to a space in which literature is not merely referenced but materially and symbolically enacted. While explicitly devoted to Oscar Wilde, the venue is also strongly influenced by the imaginative universe of Lewis Carroll, a convergence that invites reflection on the affinities between the two writers. Both figures, contemporaries linked to Oxford and Victorian culture, employ humor, irony, and fantasy to challenge social and literary conventions, albeit through different modes – Carroll via nonsense and absurdity, Wilde through paradox and aestheticism. Their juxtaposition within the bar underscores their shared capacity to combine playfulness with critique and helps explain their enduring relevance in popular culture. The Oscar Wilde bar thus functions as a space in which literary traditions are reactivated and reinterpreted, allowing visitors to inhabit a fantastical yet critical "other" world that mirrors the imaginative experience of reading Wilde or Carroll themselves.

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