

# **Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde**

**Paul L. Fortunato**

MODERNIST AESTHETICS AND CONSUMER  
CULTURE IN THE WRITINGS OF  
OSCAR WILDE

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MODERNIST AESTHETICS AND CONSUMER

CULTURE IN THE WRITINGS OF OSCAR

WILDE

Paul L. Fortunato

# Preface

In 1891 Oscar Wilde published his essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," a work that proclaims the value of socialism and that defends the artist against a Philistine public: Wilde takes a stance against consumerism, against the practitioners of consumer culture in both journalism and fashion.<sup>1</sup> For example, he attacks popular periodical culture, which "makes use of journalists," and even gives "absolute freedom to journalists, [while it] entirely limits the artist" (AC 277). Yet less than a year later, his play *Lady Windermere's Fan* was a box office success at a major West End theater; Wilde thus turns to the genre most oriented to consumer culture and the mass audience, doing so at one of the main commercial theater centers in the world. Also, of great significance to my point, the play was so obviously a vehicle for marketing expensive fashion that when the summer parody of the play was put up, the main character's name was "Lady Winterstock."<sup>2</sup>

Critics have therefore been somewhat unsure of, and even uncomfortable with, Wilde's relationship to consumer culture, a culture embodied in both journalism and fashion and whose icon is the woman of fashion. For example, even as Regenia Gagnier aligns Wilde's plays with his contemporaries' "critiques of industrial capitalism and mass society," she is forced to qualify her claim:

The commodification of Wilde and his works, of the artist in general and bohemian artists in particular, in consumer society, complicates the pursuit of individuality and freedom of thought and expression. (27)

Although she analyzes the content of Wilde's commodification very ably, Gagnier wrongly sees as "complication" what should be seen as the key to Wilde's artistic project.<sup>3</sup> John Sloan is better at deciphering Wilde and showing that this "complication" is really the core of his aesthetics. He points

out that his very defense of the artist's autonomy was itself implicated in consumerism: "the appeal to the 'man of taste,' the connoisseur, in arranging and decorating one's surroundings, was an advanced version of capitalist consumerism" (135). Sloan sees a direct link between aspects of Wilde's "high" appeal and aspects of his mass cultural appeal.

Building on the work of Sloan and others, I argue that Wilde cannot make art—and tends not even to conceive of art—that is not commodified. His is a consumer modernism. I use the term consumer modernism because I approach Wilde's work as both consumer culture product and as a foundational moment in modernist aesthetics. His aesthetic descendants managed to utilize the aesthetics while they simultaneously "ghosted" Wilde (and his consumerism). Ann Ardis devotes an entire chapter of her *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880–1922* to "Inventing literary traditions, ghosting Oscar Wilde and the Victorian *fin de siècle*." I argue—together with theorists like Ardis and Edward Said<sup>4</sup>—that there is no modernism without Wilde, and particularly without Wilde's commitment to an aesthetics of surface. This aesthetics of surface he theorizes by building a philosophy of art through an analysis of consumer fashion. Also, it is true that several high modernists used elements of consumer culture in their artistic creation—Joyce in *Ulysses* and Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example.<sup>5</sup> The difference is that Wilde created art that was itself, and could not exist separate from, consumer culture.

We get a glimpse of Wilde's ideas on this consumer-based aesthetic when, in "The Decay of Lying," he playfully re-works the relationship between "Art and Life." There he describes the impact of Pre-Raphaelite paintings on large numbers of middle- and upper-class women consumers.

We have all seen in our own day in England how a certain curious and fascinating type of beauty, invented and emphasised by two imaginative painters [Rossetti and Burne-Jones], has so influenced Life that whenever one goes to a private view or to an artistic salon one sees, here the mystic eyes of Rossetti's dream, the long ivory throat, the strange, square-cut jaw, the loosened shadowy hair. . . . A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher. (AC 307).

Rossetti's paintings of women like Elizabeth Siddal and Jane Morris were not just popular paintings that were reproduced over and over in prints. They created fashion styles and set trends in dress and interior design, those trends being reflected in popular Arts and Crafts wallpapers and popular "aesthetic dress" styles. And Wilde significantly links this fashion phenomenon to

marketing within a mass culture—hence the reference to the “enterprising publisher.”

Because he makes the desire to impact a mass audience so central, the elements of Wilde’s consumer modernism are superficial ornament and ephemeral public image—both of which he links to rituals of consumer culture.<sup>6</sup> By surface I mean the opposite of substance, what is usually thought of as “mere, deceptive surface.” By image I refer to the photographs and reproductions that proliferate in consumer culture and advertising, as well as the public images cultivated by celebrities and their public relations consultants. By rituals I mean the stylized, conventional dances by which persons interact with groups of bodies—at balls, department stores, and theaters. Wilde takes up these elements, surface, image, and ritual, all as a strategy to force us to re-conceptualize our ideas on culture and art. That is, he elevates the marginalized elements—things gendered feminine, considered as bodily rather than rational, and often marked as Oriental—in order to de-center the Western, rationalist, masculinist subject. He offers a conception of art that is not anti-Western but otherwise-than-Western.

Thus, in *Lady Windermere*, Wilde achieves what Rossetti had achieved in painting: Art—including the fashions and superficial social rituals of his characters—influences Life, or in other words, the mass audience. He thematizes through fashion, and particularly through the woman of fashion, Mrs. Erlynne, how art functions in society generally. I further suggest that his conceptions of the surface image, the bodily, and the ritual were foundational elements of what became twentieth-century modernism—thus we can call Wilde’s aesthetic a consumer modernism, a root and branch of modernism that was largely erased.

After a background section (Ch. 1), this study first of all engages in a cultural studies analysis of the periodical (Ch. 2), fashion (Ch.’s 3 and 4), and theater (Ch.’s 5 and 6) industries of late-Victorian London. In the midst of that analysis, I use Wilde’s theorizing about aesthetics, particularly an aesthetics of surface, image, and ritual, to account for his activity among these industries: as a journalist, magazine editor, commentator on dress and design, and popular playwright. Finally, I use all of the above to do a fairly traditional close reading of a canonical text, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, and doing so, I offer a new reading of the play.

Other critics, for a variety of reasons, have not asked questions about such things as: how Wilde fuses popular mass culture and modernist aesthetics; why Wilde invested so much of his energy, from 1884–1890, in the newspaper and magazine industries; why, after publishing his great critical essays in *Intentions*, Wilde would write an apparently standard comedy, and



one that dealt not with any "serious" social issues, but with superficial fashion and the inner workings of high society.

### A NOTE ON THE EDITIONS USED:

The texts I used (and the abbreviations) for citing are the following:

- AC    *The Artist as Critic*. edited by Richard Ellmann. (1969)
- CL    *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*. edited by Merlin Holland et al. (2000)
- CW    *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. edited by Robert Ross. (1909)
- LWF   *Lady Windermere's Fan*. edited by Ian Small. (1980)
- OW    *Oscar Wilde*. Richard Ellmann. (1988)
- PDG   *The Picture of Dorian Gray: Norton Critical Ed.* edited by Donald Lawler (1988)

The critical essays I draw from *The Artist as Critic*. In that collection, Ellmann uses the text that Wilde published with the Bodley Head firm in the book *Intentions* in 1891. These versions are substantially different from the original versions that were published in magazines, up to six years earlier. I am, however, not so much interested in how these texts evolved as in what Wilde's ideas on aesthetics were. Therefore, I simply chose the texts which were published last. The essays contained in *The Artist as Critic* include: "The Decay of Lying," "The Critic as Artist," "The Truth of Masks," "Pen, Pencil, and Poison," "The Soul of Man Under Socialism."

When citing newspaper and magazine articles, I cite from the *Complete Works*. A new critical edition of Wilde's works is being produced now, published by the Oxford University Press, but only a few volumes have come out so far. Occasionally, I cite from other sources for articles because the CW does not contain them. Usually, these citations are from AC.

Citations for *De Profundis* are from the *Complete Letters*, an edition of the text that has many critical tools (index and footnotes). All other letters are cited from the CL as well. Citations for *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband* are from the Ernest Benn, Ltd. critical editions. These editions are excellent critical editions, published in the early 1980s, and edited by Ian Small and Russell Jackson.

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I dedicate the project to my parents, Dominick and Loreta, who inspired me to love ideas, to love theatrical performance, and to have excellent taste in clothes.

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## Chapter One

# Background: Wilde's Social Circles and Consumer Culture

How did a bohemian anarchist find himself writing West End comedies about elite society? To set the stage for this study, it is necessary to look at the world Wilde moved in, and to approach Wilde within this context. It is worth pointing out that, in his commingling of high and mass culture, of detached aestheticism and engaged reformism, Wilde was like many other writers and artists in late Victorian Britain. Kathy Psomiades notes that that culture, particularly among the aesthetes, was characterized by a close connection between art and mass culture.

In aestheticism, we can see the process whereby the private, lovely woman who signifies aesthetic experience shades gradually and imperceptibly into the public, tawdry woman who signifies the vulgarity of mass-cultural and commodity experience. (13)

Late-Victorian culture was a particularly fertile soil for the kind of consumer modernist work that Wilde engaged in. Here was a culture that frequently saw a fusion of high artistic production and efforts at middle-class taste-education. As Psomiades notes above, the woman aesthete often stood at the center of these efforts. And since she stood there, she was a creature of both high risk and high possibility, a quality that seems to have attracted Wilde to them. Not unaware that this was a potentially volatile combination of elements, Wilde and others worked the tensions within this cultural mixture, making them essential tools in their art.

Therefore, one major component of this study involves addressing Wilde's context, his artistic and personal relationships with the people in the circles he moved among, particularly in the early parts of his career. It is clear that Wilde was a professional networker, and someone who knew that it was part of his job to build strong relationships with people who would

help get his work before the public—Wilde had no intention of becoming a starving artist. He established himself in the heart of the capital of the major empire in the world. Wilde was conscious that his work was best carried out in enormous commercial cities. He thus saw that, in order to be most fully himself, he needed an *immediate relationship* to the cosmopolis, even for the sake of his creativity. Kerry Powell makes the point that Wilde needed London and its dramatic milieu as “an arena of cooperation and conflict which [was] essential to his work as playwright” (143).

One writer of an 1890 article, “Literary Women in London Society,” makes note of the changing face of that Society. In the past, the inner circle included people in the court and “only a few representatives of literature and art, and those most privileged by birth” (*North American Review* 151.329). However, by the 1880s, the writer notes that things had changed:

[A]ristocratic exclusiveness is a thing of the past, and fashionable people are only too ready to welcome as friend the men and women who amuse them or make them think. The English craving after social sensation has become rather a by-word among nations, but at least the craving is a healthy sign of dissatisfaction with the vapidness of ordinary social life. There is place in Society now for the leading members of almost every art and profession. (329)

Wilde certainly was adept at both amusing members of society and making them think. It was his expertise with these strategies that enabled him to ingratiate himself at the highest levels. The one circle that encompasses many of the other circles Wilde moved in is precisely the aesthetes, particularly the women. I use the term *female aesthete* according to Talia Schaffer’s definition in her groundbreaking book, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes* (2000). This group of women writers—or we should say *groups*, because they did not all form any formal group—is key to the re-reading of Wilde that I am offering.

Towards the “high” end of society is the elite social group of men and women who called themselves the ‘Souls,’ which included some female aesthetes. One group more in the middle is the Arts and Crafts movement of such figures as William Morris, E.W. Godwin and Walter Crane. And a group towards the lower end is the growing cadre of young London journalists, people like Bernard Shaw, Graham R. Tomson/Watson, and Richard LeGallienne. Also, a group that was present among all these groups was gay London. In fact, Wilde’s lover Lord Alfred Douglas was a member of one of

the Souls' major families: he was cousin to Lady Elcho and George Wyndham, the former being mistress of the estate *Stanmore*, one of the major Souls gathering places, and the latter being a political colleague of arch-Soul Arthur Balfour. Indeed, George Wyndham, a good friend of Wilde, worked assiduously first to try to prevent Wilde's disastrous legal action in 1895, and then to try to get Wilde to leave Britain before he was arrested. He was perhaps as much concerned about his family's dignity as he was about Wilde's well-being. (I purposely deal very little with gay London because it is much less central to his mass-cultural persona, and because it has already been written about so thoroughly.)

## THE 'SOULS'

Let us begin at the top. London high society in the 1880s and 1890s was a collection of nobility and wealthy gentry. This was a powerful group, many of the men wielding power in perhaps the most powerful assembly in the world at the time, the British Parliament. Also, both men and women elites were cultivating themselves in their exquisite lifestyle, patronizing the best that the arts world had to offer at theaters, galleries and concerts, as well as through the "decorative" arts of house design and dress. London was a place where elite society was in constant contact with leaders in the arts, a fact that allowed many artists of low estate to rise quickly—which was also something that made many more traditional people nervous. (It is striking how many actor-managers, department store owners, popular writers and the like, end up getting knighted in the 1890s. Had Wilde not been prosecuted, my guess is that he would also have been knighted.) The Souls prided themselves on being large-minded enough to associate with people who did not have means but had culture. Thus, they dared to wander beyond the comfortable confines of Belgravia and Mayfair into the more mixed-districts like South Kensington and Chelsea. Painters like James M. Whistler and D.G. Rossetti lived in Chelsea, and eventually Wilde moved to a house there with his painter friend, Frank Miles. When he got married, he also purchased a home in Chelsea.

The Souls, though they were not always admired, were undoubtedly at the center of all London society. Charlotte Gere describes them in the following terms: "The galaxy of friends known as the 'Souls' was, in a glittering era, the most scintillating social group in the country" (1). The leading figure was Arthur James Balfour, in the 1880s a rising Conservative politician; later on, he would rise all the way to Prime Minister. But it was really the women in the Souls who were the driving force, women like Madeline Wyndham,

founder of the Royal School of Art Needlework, and her daughter Mary—like her brother George, a close friend of Wilde. Mary would become Lady Elcho (and was also, incidentally, the lifelong confidante of Balfour). The Wyndhams' estate house, *Clouds*, was a major gathering site for the Souls. Designed by William Morris's associate, Philip Webb, and decorated by Morris himself, it represented the apex of British aesthetic culture. Perhaps the next two central Souls were the Tennant sisters. Wilde dedicated many of his fairy tales to Souls, including "The Star Child" to Margot Tennant and "The Birthday of the Infanta" to Mrs. W. Grenfell (Lady Desborough).

The correspondence between Balfour and Lady Elcho has been published in a scholarly edition. Balfour writes there of seeing Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Wilde at the country estate gatherings of the de Grey family (77). He also tells Lady Elcho in an 1893 letter that "I have just been invited by Oscar Wilde to go to the first night of his new play [*A Woman of No Importance*]" (93). Their box, said Balfour, was to include George and Lady Grosvenor (both patrons of the London arts scene). In fact, when Wilde set the play *Lady Windermere's Fan* at a house on Carlton House Terrace, he may have had Balfour's home (number 4) in mind.<sup>1</sup> The Elchos lived very nearby, at 23 St. James's Place, which was within a stone's throw of the theater where *Lady Windermere* played.

One of the Souls, the poet Wilfrid Blunt (a first cousin of Percy Wyndham) writes of Wilde, "The fine society of London and especially the 'Souls' ran after him because they knew he could always amuse them, and the pretty women all allowed him great familiarities" (463).<sup>2</sup> It was this social scene that Wilde thrived in. In the late 1870s, he was just out of university, was fairly poor and was barely at the beginning of a writing career<sup>3</sup>—yet because of his personality and the openness of much of fine society, he soon was walking amongst the most elite circles. Alice Comyns Carr, who would contribute to the *Woman's World*, writes that "Oscar Wilde was often of the Walton party [at the Lewis family estate]—fresh from Oxford then, and considerably esteemed as a wit himself" (129). There were several sub-groups in which Wilde also made his presence felt, including the Grosvenor Gallery and other art galleries, the West End theater world, and the Arts and Crafts world.

Wilde in fact wrote an article about the opening of the new Grosvenor Gallery in 1877. The Grosvenor was a place associated with aestheticism, Pre-Raphaelitism, and to a lesser extent, the Arts and Crafts movement. The money behind the Grosvenor came from Sir Coutts Lindsay, whose wife Blanche—another who would contribute to the *Woman's World*—was a prominent female aesthete. There were Sunday afternoons at the Gallery "at which Lady Lindsay presided over a company including all the most notable

people in Literature and Art, to say nothing of the 'beaux noms,' courtiers and politicians in her more exclusive set" (Comyns Carr 77). Comyns Carr wrote that the Lindsays "took a certain pride in being the first members of Society to bring people of their own set into friendly contact with the distinguished folk of art and literature" (*Reminiscences* 54).

Alice Comyns Carr was a theatrical costume designer, and apparently was delighted to be the inspiration for the cartoon aesthete character, Cimabue Brown, created and mocked by George Du Maurier in *Punch*. Alice's husband, Joe Comyns Carr, was one of the directors of the Grosvenor Gallery, as well as a West End playwright and producer. (These links among the art gallery, aesthete, and theater worlds come up again and again. Wilde represented just one among many in his penchant for linking them all.) The Grosvenor in the late 1870s sought to offer an alternative to the Royal Academy exhibits, building around the works of Edward Burne-Jones, Walter Crane and James M. Whistler. (D. G. Rossetti, who was ailing and near the end of his life, decided not to show his work there). Later, in the 1890s, Joe Comyns Carr produced *King Arthur* for Henry Irving (the leading actor-manager of the age) at the Lyceum, with dresses designed in part by Carr's wife, and with sets and clothing designed by Burne-Jones. Carr also wrote and produced *Forgiveness* for George Alexander in January 1892. His play immediately preceded Alexander's production of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (which began in February). In addition, Carr—who was a remarkably active person—was editor of the *English Illustrated Magazine*, and he managed to get Wilde to write a couple of pieces for the magazine.

Another theatrical acquaintance of Wilde was Ellen Terry, the star actress, and some-time-domestic partner of the aesthete interior designer and theatrical producer, E.W. Godwin. Godwin has been described as "the most flamboyant and brilliant figure of the 1870s and 80s. [Also, he] left his mark on furniture design and helped create a radically simplified interior that was adapted from Japanese traditions, Greek, Egyptian, and English Renaissance forms" (Gere 398). One can see in aesthetic designs like Godwin's that British imperial conquest fed right into aesthetic styles of design.

These various social circles overlapped a lot: high society, the West End theater, aesthetic dress and interior design, Pre-Raphaelite and Impressionist painting, and the Arts and Crafts movement. It is also striking that Wilde was managing to place himself so well within almost all of the circles. For a time, he and Whistler formed a sort of dynamic duo, frequenting the events in the London "Season," and spending time with the professional beauties of the time in studios, galleries, theaters and society balls. The two were staples of the society columns. Wilde also formed a sort of public-relations team



together with actress Lillie Langtry. He performed outlandish acts like sleeping on her doorstep and walking down Piccadilly with a lily in his hand to deliver to her. He was a prime mover in getting her started in an acting career, both in London and New York. She for her part helped make sure Wilde was invited to society events.

## ARTS AND CRAFTSMEN

Wilde formed friendships also with Walter Crane and E.W. Godwin, both of whom were leaders in the Arts and Crafts movement, and who associated themselves closely with William Morris. Wilde's connection with Crane can be seen from the fact that Crane wrote for the *Woman's World*, and was more than once reviewed by Wilde in a periodical. Crane also did illustrations for some of Wilde's published collections of fairy tales. Wilde's connection with Godwin was also manifold. Wilde was friendly with Godwin's former partner Ellen Terry. He also lived in a house whose interior was designed by Godwin—indeed he wrangled with Godwin for tarrying in its completion. Wilde reviewed Godwin's theatrical endeavors, and led off his first edition of the *Woman's World* with an article about Godwin's outdoor productions. He also borrowed many of Godwin's ideas when writing his essay on theatrical costumes, "The Truth of Masks."

It is people like Crane, Godwin and Morris who most strongly exemplify the way the arts and commerce were so closely connected during that era. Morris ended up somewhat disillusioned with his own life, lamenting the fact that while he held Socialist principles, he spent the bulk of his time catering to the expensive tastes of the very wealthy. That is not to say that he did not have a real, beneficial effect on the whole of society, educating people's tastes in all sectors of society so that middle- and working-class people could decorate their homes in a more "artistic" and less purely-commercial manner. But it is a fact that, like *haute couture*, the Arts and Crafts movement operated by creating expensive commodities that only the wealthiest could afford. By virtue of that fact, the high fashion would only secondarily shape and dictate popular fashion—through the very mass-produced goods that Morris so hated. Mrs. Comyns Carr also exemplified this strategy, designing theatrical dresses for Ellen Terry. Fashion was thus disseminated by means of public spectacles and other media.

This principle is well illustrated by the "Morris Room" at the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum), a room that is both a work of art and a commercial advertisement. The museum was started precisely with the idea of providing models of artistic work that members of