



Xiaoyi Zhou

Beyond Aestheticism Oscar Wilde and Consumer Society



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Xiaoyi Zhou

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Contents

Acknowledgements	(v)
------------------------	-----

I A Genealogy of 'Oscarism': Modern and Postmodern Perspectives on Oscar Wilde	(1)
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II Wilde's Orientalism and Late Nineteenth-Century Consumer Culture	(40)
1. Japan as an 'Artistic Utopia'	(41)
2. The 'Japanese Effect', Impressionism and the 'Pleasure of the Simulacrum'	(47)
3. Japanese <i>Objets D'Art</i> in a Popular and Consumerist Cultural Milieu	(54)
4. The 'Empty-Object' and Japan as a 'Fictive Nation'	(65)

III The Mask with a Double-Faced Role	(77)
1. The Mask, Modernist Poetics and Intensified Personality	(78)
2. The Mask and the 'Empty-Subject'	(89)
3. The Mask and Its Degradation	(100)

IV Wilde as Man of Theatre	(132)
1. 'The Aesthetic Value of Smoke' and a Spectacular Theatre: Scenery, Costume and Stage Effects in Wilde's Early Plays— <i>Vera</i> , or <i>The Nihilists</i> and <i>The Duchess of Padua</i>	(133)
2. Desire for the Body without a Soul; <i>Salome</i>	(145)
3. Society Comedies; Dandies and Their Epigrammatic Language Style	(157)

V Wilde's London	(178)
1. Symbolist Imagery in the Dark Streets of London	(178)
2. Beyond the Symbolist Representation of the City; Space, Social Relations and Subjectivity	(186)
3. The Return of Repressed Commercialism?	(192)
4. The Way Out; Towards a Space Saturated with Spectacles	(198)
 Conclusion 'Curious Inversion': A New Way of Thinking	 (210)
 Bibliography	 (218)

I A Genealogy of 'Oscarism': Modern and Postmodern Perspectives on Oscar Wilde

To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction.

Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*¹

Oscar Wilde has long been considered as a paradoxical figure, and many critics have pointed to the contradictory nature of his work. The notion of the contradictory identity of 'Oscarism',² described in terms of a conflict between two groups of opposing values and styles, is one of the earliest and perhaps the most far-reaching critical paradigms that have been imposed upon Wilde's life and art. A review in the *Athenaeum* (6 June 1891) argued that Wilde's 'labour over paradoxes and self-contradictions' actually 'spoils his style' (see Beckson, 1970, 92-93). Other critics, however, tend to view his contradictoriness favourably. Arthur Symonds praises it for 'combining truth and cleverness'; 'By constantly saying the opposite of sensible opinions he proves to us that opposites can often be equally true' (see Beckson, 1970, 96). This view that Wilde develops different literary styles, and poses self-consciously as a contradictory personality, is accepted by many critics in their research on Wilde.³ Hecketh Pearson, Wilde's biographer, who is fascinated by his various masks, regards Wilde's 'contradictory statements' as a way of posing as different characters: 'he was so constituted that he could play Hamlet at a matinée and Falstaff at an evening performance with equal assurance and conviction' (Pearson, 1946, 337). This assessment obviously echoes Wilde's own remark in 'The Decay of Lying' (1889), in which he claims that 'In Falstaff there is something of Hamlet, in Hamlet there is not a little of Falstaff' (*Works*, 975).

In this book, I shall argue that Wilde was in many ways a

combination of 'Hamlet' and 'Falstaff', both a cultural elitist and a materialist practitioner. He expressed different values in his work, and played different roles in life. He was a figurehead of the aesthetic movement in England, waging in his art a fierce protest against the Philistinism, materialism and moralism of the Victorian middle-classes. Yet actually he always followed the fashion of his day, evincing a fetishism for commodities in actual life. He was an aestheticist 'poseur', fighting against bourgeois vulgarity, and trying to redeem art from the banality of the everyday. But, on the other hand, his campaign under the banner of aestheticism was at the same time a publicity-seeking activity; in this way he sought to be 'famous', and if not famous, 'notorious' (as he confessed to David Hunter Blair at Oxford in 1880, see Mikhail, 1979, 5). His criticism and literary works are also as double-sided as his life. In his aesthetic theory he certainly evokes the modernist concept of autonomy, and the modernist search for perfect form and style. His conviction that art is superior to nature, and his aestheticist detachment from reality, were deeply indebted to the slogan of *l'art pour l'art* and therefore belong to the early wave of Anglo-American modernism. But his theoretical position always leads to more radical interpretations, displaying characteristics that go beyond modernist strategies. George Woodcock presents Wilde's 'split personality' in his monograph *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde* (1949), arguing that he is both a creative critic and an aesthetic clown, a social rebel and a social snob, a dandy and a prophet. Richard Ellmann tends to see Wilde's contradictory features in art as inherited from his Oxford mentors — Ruskin and Pater, suggesting that behind the characters of Basil Hallward and Iokanaan lurks the thought of Ruskin; behind Lord Henry and Salome we sense the presence of Pater (see Ellmann, 1969, 89).

Wilde himself never denied the contradictory nature of his life and art. On the contrary, he showed a clear awareness that he combined a variety of different values in his works. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), for example, presents succinctly Wilde's 'multitudinous masks', which are represented by the three main charac-

ters in the work. The novel in effect integrates different aspects of Wilde's social and critical thinking, revealing a complicated relationship among: 'it contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am; Lord Henry what the world thinks me; Dorian what I would like to be' (*Letters*, 352).

The inner contradictory nature of Wilde's works confirms his own remarks. He presents himself intentionally as being self-contradictory because he believes in 'the identity of contraries':

The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves. ('Phrases and Philosophies', *Works*, 1205)

Like the obscure philosophers of early Greek speculation, he [Chuang Tzu] believed in the identity of contraries;... ('A Chinese Sage', *Artist as Critic*, 1970, 222)

A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realise Hegel's system of contraries. ('The Truth of Masks', *Works*, 1078)

The last paragraph suggests that Wilde applied Hegelian dialectical thought to develop his critical thinking. When studying at Oxford, Wilde was a keen student of Hegel's philosophy. His *Oxford Notebooks* showed how much he was under the influence of the Oxford Hegelians, who explained the world in terms of evolutionary dialectics. 'In his later writings, one still can trace Hegel's impact on his criticism, especially in the way that he often presented his ideas in terms of contradiction.

Yet Wilde's contradictions and paradoxes cannot be fully understood if put into the framework of the Hegelian logic of contraries. Though not consciously so, Wilde's thinking was deeply rooted in the newly emergent consumerist society of the late nineteenth century.⁵ Wilde's age witnessed a radical change in every social respect. As we shall see below, during the second half of the

nineteenth century there occurred the emergence of popular culture and modern technical innovations. The great buildings of the Universal Exhibitions, which took place in different cities across the Western world, were seen as palaces of consumption, and fashioned a mythology of consumerism and shaped the commercial life of the late-Victorians in England, France and the United States. The swift development of the department store over the same period, which utilized new inventions in glass and lighting technology, inaugurated a new way of seeing things and marked a culture of images. The rapid growth of the metropolis, and the construction of docks, warehouses, bridges, factories, gasworks, railway stations, hotels, banks, office buildings, gave birth to a new urban landscape which was further 'aestheticized' by powerful new forms of artificial lighting, culminating in electricity which was available from the 1880s. The various popular shows, panoramas, moving panoramas, musicals, performances and the spectacular theatre fostered an enduring taste for spectacle. New kinds of popular newspapers and magazines — *Illustrated London News* (1842), *Illustrated Times* (1855), *Penny Illustrated Paper* (1861), and *Tit-Bits*, *Pearson's Weekly*, *Answers* in the 1880s — which were full of advertisements and pictorial images were widely circulated. The advertising industry also flourished at the time, and it contributed to the formation of a commodity culture in which highly artificial literary structures and extravagant modes of representation served to stylize things. Human character, as Virginia Woolf later observed, also greatly 'changed' (Woolf, 96). Contemporary people, in Wilde's words, were 'awfully commercial' (*Works*, 415). It is not surprising to note that a society like this would exercise a great impact on a sensitive writer like Wilde. In this respect, Raymond Williams's remark is illuminating:

we can only understand this tradition of criticism of new industrial society if we recognize that it is compounded of very different and at times even directly contradictory elements. The growth of the new society was so confusing, even to the best minds, that positions were drawn up in terms

of inherited categories, which then revealed unsuspected and even opposing implications. (Williams, 1963, 38)

Although in this paragraph Williams refers mainly to those writers who lived in the first half of the nineteenth century, the view that 'nineteenth-century tradition' is compounded of 'contrasts' is particularly applicable to fin-de-siècle writers. A 'world of contradictions' remained for those who lived in the second half of the century. The vision that everything was pregnant with its contrary actually gained larger scale significance at the end and turn of the century. What is important in Williams's remark is that the contradictory ideas of writers and artists should be related to their social environment and development. For us, this means a consumerist social condition and the development of its cultural form — the commodity — which became more and more dominant in everyday life in Wilde's time. Wilde and other aesthetes' contradictory responses and paradoxical attitudes towards their cultural environment should be examined in the light of this social transformation.

As we shall see below, the conjuncture of commerce and culture, the convergence between consumerist materialism and cultural elitism, made the binary opposition between them problematic. Various universal exhibitions created a coherent representational universe for commodities and the spectacle began to occupy the cultural arena; while at the same time art and artists were contaminated or 'degraded' in their material environment. The traditional binary opposition of the material and the spiritual is thus deconstructed. Yet at this relatively early stage of the commodification process, the commodity culture was not as powerfully established as it has since become, and consumerism faced fierce resistance and protest from those cultural elitists who were angry with this 'vulgar' or degrading process in their society. What Wilde and other aesthetes attempted in their art was to sustain this traditional binary opposition, to redeem artists from their 'awfully commercial' situation, to retain the purity and autonomy of art, and to preserve an untainted territory for their aesthetic dream. Yet their works were in fact of-

ten unconsciously characterized by consumerist features. Their great efforts, in many ways quite ironically, reinforced this commodity-oriented social change. In their life, thought and works they certainly created an 'artistic world' which they believed was transcendental to everyday life; but to us, as I shall argue below, this world embraces the real world and is shot through by the consumerist way of life. This paradox produces a central contradiction in the aesthetes' works, particularly in Wilde's, that what they say always leads beyond itself to a point which is against their original intention.

Wilde's contradictions, therefore, should be investigated in the light of the tension between the 'artistic world' and the consumerist world. This distinction of the 'two worlds' is a shared view among aesthetes. This differentiation locates Wilde and other aesthetes in the struggle between life and art. It is a basic aestheticist stance that fosters 'aesthetic awakening'. André Gide reported Wilde's remark in his memoir *Oscar Wilde* (1901) that we should understand that

there are two worlds; the one that is without one's speaking about it; it's called the *real world* because there's no need to talk about it in order to see it. And the other is the world of art; that's the one which has to be talked about because it would not exist otherwise. (in Ellmann, 1969, 27)

Fundamental to this remarkable claim which suggests the emergence of a new aesthetic consciousness, is a recognition of a separation between 'the real world' and 'the world of art'. For Wilde, art must never be confused with the mere reflection of empirical reality. On the contrary, art constitutes itself out of the imaginative transformation of the empirical object into an aesthetic reality. The more distant aesthetic reality is from 'actual life', the more perfect it will be. This claim also reveals Wilde's different attitudes towards the two worlds. 'The real world' should be devalued and neglected; it is not worthy of mention. On the other hand, 'the world of art',

which is purely imaginative, can be presented to take over from the 'real' one. Art and 'actual life' reverse their places within the traditional framework of their relationship; art takes priority over reality. I shall return to this point again, but first I would like to take a closer look at Wilde's two 'worlds'.

On his American tour of 1882, Wilde delivered four lectures aiming to define aesthetic reality in various ways. In 'The English Renaissance', Wilde argues that the artistic quality of a piece of art is not dependent on its subject-matter but on the perfect handling of form. The essay aims to develop an aesthetic attitude which creates the conditions for an experience of beauty. Wilde's concept of autonomy, which celebrates art's 'flawless beauty and perfect form of its expression', sets out to redeem art from 'common life' by moving it into a new order of higher values. This emphasis gives art the upper-hand in the relationship between the two worlds. To convert or to lift the everyday into art is also the concern of other lectures. In 'The Decorative Art' (named originally as 'The House Beautiful'), for instance, Wilde develops detailed plans to create a better environment for people in order to construct 'a beautiful external world'. Posing both as an aesthete and an expert in housing and dressing, he focuses on building materials, interior decoration, furniture selection, 'pleasing designs' for the wallpaper, and colourful clothes which match and support the beautiful lines of the body. Through fine attention to detail, Wilde believed that he could increase the value of ordinary things and enhance sensibility to the realm of beauty. In this way he could complete his aesthetic cause which aimed to set an artistic structure both domestic and external over everyday life.

In Wilde's view, therefore, 'the world of Art' is not only in contrast to 'the real world', but it also imposes its order upon 'the real world'; aesthetic experience of beauty not only opposes prosaic experience of the everyday, but also hoists it onto a higher plane of values. Aesthetes conquer 'the real world' in a process in which everything is experienced from an aesthetic point of view. This process was reinforced by Wilde's cult of aesthetic objects — natural or

man-made things which had formal qualities and artistic perfection such as blue china, peacocks' feathers, lilies and sunflowers. These assorted objects prized by Wilde for their 'perfection in design' were selected by him as artefacts to symbolize the artistic world — a higher, aesthetic reality which governs actual life.

In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), Walter Benjamin argues that modern life and technical innovations (cinema, radio, gramophone, photography, telegraph) have profoundly altered the status of the artist and the 'works of art'. He regards the aesthetic attitude, (which was initiated by French symbolists such as Mallarmé but prevailed in England in the aesthetic movement), as 'a negative theology in the form of the idea of "pure" art' (Benjamin, 1982, 226). This 'theology' inhabited an age of mechanical reproduction, of the increasing significance of the masses and mass consumption, and of a change of 'humanity's entire mode of existence'. 'At the time', Benjamin observes, 'art reacted with the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*' and 'denied ... any categorizing by subject matter' (Benjamin, 1982, 226). Wilde's and other aesthetes' notion of the world of pure art is thus a response to the crisis of traditional values as well as a protest against 'degenerating' social conditions.

It is therefore worth noting what happened in Wilde's 'real world'. The process of commodification, marked by various international commodity exhibitions and the emergence of commercial institutions such as the department store, began to take place at this time. In 1851, the first world fair, 'the Great Exhibition', was presented in London. In 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', Wilde reacted violently against it, calling it 'the Great Exhibition of international vulgarity' (*Works*, 1098). Yet it was certainly a great event which marked the decisive emergence of consumerism in the second half of the nineteenth century. It exercised enormous influence on English public life, and afterwards the commodity became a central focus of modern society. 'The Exhibition', observed the *Journal of Gideon Martall*, 'engrosses everybody, and disarranges everything; it has literally driven all the London world mad' (23

May 1851). It was the first time a systematic display of commodities was designed for the public, and people saw the complete transformation of actual manufacturing articles into beautiful images. The Crystal Palace offered a 'symbolic universe', in which the image of the commodity marked the dominance of exchange value over use value, in Marx's terms. In his brilliant cultural study 'Paris — The Capital of the Late Nineteenth Century' (1935, published in 1955), Walter Benjamin remarkably observed that 'the world exhibitions glorified the exchange-value of commodities. They created a frameworks in which their use-value receded into the background. They opened up a phantasmagoria into which people entered in order to be distracted' (Benjamin, 1973, 165).

Other Universal Expositions were held from time to time, stabilizing and developing the rhetoric of public representation of industrial goods initiated by the Great Exhibition of 1851. A second Great Exhibition, held in 1862 in London, again involved the spectacular display of a vast number of commodities, including those from Oriental countries such as Japan and China. In 1867 and 1879 in France, Paris Expositions were attended by American Artists and English aesthetes, such as E. W. Godwin, Whistler, Wilde and many others. In the United States, between 1876 and 1916, nearly one hundred million people visited the international exhibitions held in Philadelphia (1876), New Orleans (1885), Chicago (1893), Atlanta (1895), Tennessee (1897), Omaha (1898), and many other places (see Rydell, 1984). Not surprisingly, these world fairs, characterized by their diversity and heterogeneity, promoted the mass consumption of industrial goods, presented new architectural forms and new mediums of entertainment, and provided visitors with a galaxy of spectacles and symbols. Henry Adams, a historian who was sensitive to the social transformations taking place at the time and fascinated by the notion of mask, 'professed the religion of World's Fairs, without which he held education to be a blind impossibility' (see Rydell, 1984, 3). As we shall see in Chapter 2, the English aesthetic movement, the spread of Orientalism among fin-de-siècle artists, and the rise of impressionist art

were inseparable from the International Expositions of 1862 (London), 1867 (Paris), 1873 (Vienna), and 1878 (Paris). The elegance of the Japanese and Chinese artefacts on display was particularly remarkable and influential.

The rise of the department store can be dated from almost the same period. In 1852, Aristide Boucicaut took over the Bon Marché in Paris, and made it the first department store in the world. During the years of his ownership, it went on rising at a comparable rate. Around 1869, a huge new Bon Marché building was built to replace the old one, and it soon became the largest single department store before the first World War. According to Michael Miller, the author of a history of Bon Marché, the store became the world where bourgeois culture itself was on display. Commodity goods and their images were coming to constitute lifestyle itself, and consumption in the store became a substitute for being bourgeois. The images that the Bon Marché spread to the middle-class masses 'shaped the bourgeois way of life' (Miller, 1981, 185).

Other stores followed the model of the Bon Marché rapidly, such as those in Paris (Le Louvre, La Belle Jardinière, Le Printemps, Le Bazar de l'Hotel de Ville) and in America: Macy's in New York, Wanamaker in Philadelphia, Marshall Field in Chicago (see Pasdermadjian, 3-9). The same forces we noted for France and the United States were at work in Britain. From the 1870s onwards, within a very short period, department stores had been established as one of the most powerful institutions in late Victorian social life. In 1873, Harrods built a two-storey extension on its back garden. By 1880, almost 100 assistants were employed by them. As a result, by 1894, an advertisement in the *Daily Telegraph* could announce: 'Harrods serves the world' (see Weinreb and Hibbert, 366). Other stores, such as Whiteley's and Lewis's in London, were also expanding rapidly. Whiteley's started as a small clothing store in the 1860s. By the time Oscar Wilde shopped there, it had become a full-scale department store, naming itself 'The Universal Provider'. It is said that it could offer everything: from perfume to pianos and from a 'pin to an elephant at short no-

tice' (see von Eckardt *et al.*, 124; Weinreb and Hibbert, 960). One may say that in the course of a few decades the department store swept across the whole Western world, along with all sorts of advertisements in the daily and magazine press which expanded rapidly at the same time. Thus Emile Zola, who attempted to write a novel about a Parisian department store, noted that 'The strength of the department store is increased tenfold by the accumulation of merchandise of different sorts, which all support each other and push each other forward' (see Pasdermadjian, 12). And Thomas Richards observes similarly in *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (1990) that 'In the first half of the nineteenth century the commodity was a trivial thing, like one of Adam Smith's pins. In the second half it had a world-historical role to play in a global industrial economy' (Richards, 1). The commodity and the department store where the commodity is transformed into the image, came to be a dominant cultural force which ranged far and wide over social life at that time.

The commodity, and its spectacular representation as engineered by the Great Exhibition, Bon Marché, Harrods and other universal exhibitions and department stores, is thus one of the most powerful systems of signs to exercise its impact upon late Victorian life. Although the process of commodification was long in the making, an 'era of the spectacle' now came into existence and brought about a conception that human life and cultural endeavour could be represented by the display of commodity goods. However, the theoretical significance of the commodity and its spectacular effects was not fully understood until the late 1960s when Guy Debord wrote forcefully of the commodity spectacle. In his *Society of the Spectacle* (1977), he argues that the commodity spectacle 'is not a supplement to the real world', nor 'an additional decoration' to it, but rather, the heart of a consumerist society. The commodity spectacle is 'the present model of socially dominant life', and 'the world ... which the spectacle *makes visible* is the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived' (Debord, 6, 37). The fetish of the