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Wilde's Lectures and Trials: The Imitation, Reproduction, and Simulation of Poses

Wilde and Baudrillard

Concerning Wilde's relationship to late-Victorian society, Thorsten Botz-Bomstein maintains: 'He is only what he plays [...] in the end he plays *their* game but, because only *he* plays, it is always his game' (1995, 288). I would suggest that others, in their attempts to undo Wilde, played as much with Wilde's masks and poses as he himself did. Wilde and society collaborated in playing a game in which aesthetic, ethical, and epistemological authority was at stake. I will explain my thesis with references to the reproduction of Wilde's poses during his lecture tour in America and his trials in England. Baudrillard's theory of simulacra helps us to understand the games Wilde and his counterparts played in the negotiation of his position in society.

Baudrillard distinguishes three historical phases of simulacra or representations: imitation, serial (re)production, and simulation. From the renaissance to the revolution in the late eighteenth century, simulacrum took the form of the imitation of reality. The model of imitation entailed the analogy, i.e., similarities and differences, between a representation and its referent. This model would permit the play of illusions and masks and the disillusionment and unmasking of wrong representations by looking behind or beneath the surface. In the industrial age of the nineteenth century, serial (re)production erased the uniqueness of the original representation. A work of art and its copy became (nearly) equivalent as representations of reality. In the post-industrial twentieth century, simulation dominates reality itself. Real life is already reproduced as it is designed according to models or representations. Reality becomes the play or the mimicry of reality, an aesthetic reality (Baudrillard 1982, 28, 112-119).

Baudrillard's divergent historical models of representation can be applied to various reproductions of Wilde in the *fin de siècle*. Wilde's case shows that simulation was already a powerful rival of imitation in the late nineteenth century. Dozens of American students imitated Wilde's pose in order to reveal the 'real' Wilde behind the mask, while the trials took up Wilde's 'pose' as homosexual, using it as evidence to condemn him. Both Wilde and his opponents used imitation, which can be unmasked, and simulation, which creates its own reality.

Wilde's Lecture Tour in America

It is well known that the producer of Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *Patience*, D'Oyly Carte, invited Wilde to undertake an American lecture tour in order to boost interest in the performance by presenting Wilde as the 'original' of the satire (Moers 1978, 296-298). Critics debate whether Oscar had served as the model for the satire (Schönfeld

1986, 96-100) or modelled his pose according to the satire and the expectations of the audience (Johnson 1976, 151; McCormack 1994, 270). D'Oyly Carte presented Wilde as the referent of the satiric imitation. The *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, on the other hand, suggests that Wilde simulated his performance of the 'original' aesthete: 'Wilde successfully lived up to the image of the satire' (Drabble 1985). In fact, Wilde was not the original model for the aesthetes in the opera, but became associated with it by and by (Schönfeld 1986, 93-94). In the preparation of his role for the marketing of the opera, Wilde designed the aesthete's dress we know from his American portraits (Ellmann 1987, 210-211). The producer of the opera and Wilde collaborated in *simulating a referent after the representation*. Wilde posed as 'the poseur he was supposed to be in order that the parody poseurs of *Patience* should pay off (Cohen 1996, 42).

Wilde was asked to attend a performance of *Patience* in America (Morley 1976, 40). Morley records that the audience glanced back and forth from the 'Fleshly Poet' Bunthome (Sullivan 1976, 156) on stage to the aesthete Wilde in the box, comparing the representation to its 'original' (Morley 1976, 40-42). Bunthome merely plays the aesthete in order to attract the ladies' admiration: he confesses in a soliloquy that his pose is only a means to an end, a simple mask or imitation of an aesthete in order to gratify his vanity (Sullivan 1976, 168-170). Bunthome's final monologue discloses his real or authentic character to the audience as the actor discards his role at the end of the opera. The *double imitation* of a role and the *double unmasking* of Bunthome - the aesthete and the actor who plays him - assert the audience's construction of the world as a palpable reality behind temporary delusive appearances.

D'Oyly Carte's presentation of the original referent of an aesthete in the shape of Wilde to the audiences of *Patience*, however, may have created more doubts than certainty. Was Wilde the model aesthete whom Bunthome tried to imitate or simply a fraud just like Bunthome? If Wilde merely put on the aesthete, was he an ordinary citizen or did he 'Hyde' an abominable character? If, on the other hand, Wilde was identical with his performance, what was the difference between reality and illusion? I would argue that Wilde's double simulation of the aesthete in real life and in the theatre undermines Bunthome's double imitation of the aesthete because Wilde effaces the difference between illusion and reality, a distinction the play is based on. Wilde was the spectator and the spectacle at the same time, because the 'original aesthete' became a part of the performance directed by the producer. Wilde's function combined the simulated referent off-stage and the aesthetic object on display in the theatre, confusing the distinction between performance and reality marked by the theatrical frame.

In contrast to the satire, which unmasked the faked aesthete, Wilde sustained the 'authenticity' of his pose through his lectures on true aestheticism (Morley 1976, 41). However, in preparation for his performances as a professor of aestheticism, Wilde took lessons in speaking 'in a natural style, with a touch of affectation' (Ellmann 1987, 147-148). Wilde studied as would an actor for the conjunction of the serious professor with the 'original' aesthete. Bunthome reveals his true face behind the mask of the aesthete on stage, whereas Wilde staged an 'authentic' aesthete in lecture halls to back up his role as original model for the play: a pose is a pose is a pose.

Wilde's authority as an 'original' aesthete did not go unquestioned. Shortly before Wilde began a lecture in Boston, a group of 60 Harvard students took their places in the first two rows of seats, 'dressed in the high aesthetic line with breeches, dinner jackets, Whistler locks of white hair, hats like Bunthome's, each bearing in a stained glass attitude a sunflower' (Ellmann 1987, 173). The students performed a serial reproduction of the aesthete. Their imitation of the industrial production of uniform objects for the daily use of the masses contradicted Wilde's lectures on the individual aesthetics of life. Their imitation of the aesthete Bunthome rather than Wilde himself reduplicated the parody, in which the ridiculous aesthetic mask hides a rather ordinary man. They may have thought that Wilde was a sham like Bunthome and may have intended to unmask Wilde. The students mocked Wilde's self-appointed mission to 'civilise' the Americans as they pretended to embody the dissemination of aestheticism. Their external imitation of the aesthete destroyed the individualising function of his extravagant outward appearance.

However, Wilde was informed about their performance and, apart from an extravagant cravat, wore a dinner jacket and trousers (ibid.). Wilde is reported to have said, 'I see about me certain signs of an aesthetic movement. I see certain young men, who are no doubt sincere, but I can assure them that they are no more than caricatures' (174). Wilde ironically pretended to take the students seriously and found them wanting. He correctly applied to the students the model of imitation as he stressed the distinction between their (mis)representation and a real aesthete (like himself), whose clothes were not essential for his pose. The students retaliated by applauding every time Wilde took a sip from a glass of water during his lecture (ibid.). These students not only made Wilde dress in a rather ordinary way but marked his ordinary behaviour as being the imitation of a gentleman. Instead of unmasking the aesthete, the student audience unwittingly collaborated with Wilde in constructing the pose beneath the pose, the gentleman behind the aesthete, undermining their own concept of imitation.

Wilde discarded this aestheticist dress after his lecture tour in America (208-209). His pose as an aesthete for the purposes of marketing the opera was no longer needed, and the reproduction of his dress by the students turned it into a mock-fashion, which devalued the distinctive quality of those clothes (cf. Zima 1985, 218). Ellmann describes how Wilde's dress and hair-style changed with his turn from aestheticism to decadence (1987, 209-210), at the end of which Wilde faced the infamous trials.

Regardless of the differences between the American stage director of Wilde's lectures and the English stage directors of Wilde's trials, all of them tried to rewrite or reinvent Wilde's poses. D'Oyly Carte, the Harvard students, and Wilde's English persecutors did not unmask Wilde but reproduced his poses and negotiated the reproduction of masculinity. Whereas the students ridiculed the dissemination of aestheticism through their serial reproduction of effeminate aesthetes, the court punished the dissemination of decadence through Wilde's alleged transformation of the young men he seduced into feminised homosexuals.

Wilde's Trials in England

Wilde's notorious life can hardly be separated from its reproduction in the trials. Wilde's own account of the preliminary quarrels between himself and Queensberry ironically anticipated many of the subsequent strategies in the trials relating to Wilde's reproductions in the widest sense; i.e., the various representations of Wilde's character(s) and actions by witnesses and lawyers, the reproduction of his ideas in letters and in literature, the alleged reproduction of his homosexuality through texts and acts. According to Wilde, the Marquess of Queensberry paid him an unpleasant visit at his home in June 1894. Queensberry regarded a 'disgusting letter' that had resulted in Wilde's being blackmailed as incriminatory evidence, whereas Wilde called the letter beautiful (Ellmann 1987, 420). Wilde's question as to whether Queensberry accused his son and him of 'improper conduct' was answered thus by the Marquess: 'I do not say that you are it, but you look it [...] and you pose at it, which is just as bad' (421). The periphrasis, which avoids specifying the act, would later allow the court to condemn Wilde for gross indecency between men.[1] Queensberry asserted that Wilde's pose was as bad - or as good - as the 'real thing', a statement that would have flattered the aesthete if it had not alluded to the criminal act of homosexuality. Queensberry used the late-Victorian hermeneutics of suspicion, which decoded the inscription of homosexuality on Wilde's body without explicitly referring to it (cf. Edelman 1989, 190-192). Queensberry read Wilde's letter, body, and pose as interrelated representations, ignoring the differences between cause and effect, reality and representation. Queensberry seems to have had a hunch that, as Baudrillard would say, Wilde's reality was already infected by the simulacrum (1982, 118). What is more, he read Wilde's letter, body, and pose as expressions of homosexuality without reference either to real acts or to how the author or the intended addressee, Queensberry's son, understood the letter. He imposed the pose of a homosexual on Wilde, and Wilde commented aptly, 'you are the author of the scandal' (Ellmann 1987, 421). Queensberry did his best to fulfil this role, writing the infamous card in February 1895 that denounced Wilde as 'posing as a Somdomite' (412). In turn, the reader Wilde attributed the ruin of his life to Queensberry's inscription and, ironically, initiated the trials that destroyed him in the end (Hyde 1973, 77).

From the start of Wilde's trial against Queensberry for libel, Wilde's opponents maintained that the statement about posing as a sodomite was true because Wilde allegedly solicited the commission of sodomy (in texts and in life), and that Wilde was in fact guilty of 'indecent practices' with men (Ellmann 1987, 418). Both Wilde and his opponents based their respective statements concerning his true and his pretended poses alternately on simulation and imitation. Whereas Wilde maintained that his true pose was aesthetic and based upon the model of the Greek perfection of life, his opponents insisted that his true pose was ethically disreputable and generated vice. However, the criminalisation of homosexuality compelled the aesthete Wilde to deny

1 In a convincing deconstructivist reading, Robbins explains that the lack of a specific definition of 'gross indecency' turned the jury into an interpretive community that could attribute various (negative) meanings to the term (1997, 104).

the alleged connections between art and life - between the artist's admiration and higher love of young men and his physical relationships with young men. Ironically, the archpriest of simulation was forced to take on the deceptive mask of a charitable gentleman in order to hide the fact that he gave money to young men for homosexual services and not for the relief of their misery. Wilde added that he civilised young men. Indeed, Wilde put forth a very 'queer' interpretation of charity and education. His opponents argued on the basis of imitation as they tried to unmask Wilde's pose as a gentleman in order to convict him of homosexuality.

In all three trials, two of Wilde's letters to Lord Alfred Douglas were repeatedly reproduced and variously interpreted. Wilde endeavoured to convince the court that the incriminatory 'Hyacinth-letter' was a work of art that mirrored its readers rather than its author. At the end of the third trial, Wilde's reading was overruled. The Solicitor-General and the judge insisted that the pose of a sodomite engendered real corruption. The former insinuated that Wilde's letter to Lord Douglas imitated a love letter from a man to a woman, and therefore clearly had to be interpreted as 'evidence of guilty passion' (Hyde 1973, 257-258). Judge Wills was concerned with the effect of the letters, as they may have stimulated a young man's passions (262). Thus, he attributed the dangerous power of reproducing homosexuality to Wilde's letters.

Wilde's opponents maintained that his pose as a sodomite generated vice. The Solicitor-General stated that such a pose, which involved soliciting indecent acts for money, was 'the genesis of the man who commits these foul acts' and the 'genesis of the blackmailer' (259). At length the jury accepted the Solicitor-General's arguments and the judge accused Taylor and Wilde of having been the 'centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind' (272).

Why did the trials ignore Wilde's position as a husband and father of two sons? If the court proved the pose of the sodomite true, then Wilde's marriage would appear to have been a simulation. This conclusion would have been anathema to the court, which regarded homosexuality as the very antithesis of marriage and family, a symptom of a wider cultural degeneration (Dollimore 1988, 34; Foldy 1997, 37). The trials of Taylor and Wilde brought forth evidence that homosexuals imitated the love between men and women: cross-dressed, called male lovers 'girls', wrote letters to men as if to women, performed mock-marriages, played husband and wife, and - a fact that was not openly discussed - subverted heterosexuality by 'imitating' copulation or the consummation of marriage.[2] What was considered to be an 'unspeakable' evil (Sinfield 1994, 3) between single men must have seemed worse if a husband and father was involved because it put into question the authenticity of his married life. Ellmann maintains that, from the beginning, Wilde played the role of the husband in order to counter rumours of homosexuality. He did not simply imitate a husband, but simulated one. The *Times* paraphrased a letter of Wilde's that suggested he would realise a poetic conception of marriage (Ellmann 1987, 237). Wilde had two sons, who were the literal 'bodies of

2 Foldy maintains that Wilde intentionally performed sodomy in order to subvert compulsory heterosexuality of the middle classes (1997, 123-24). Dollimore discovered that, even in contemporary administration, homosexuality is not acceptable 'as a *pretended* family relationship' (1991, 242; emphasis mine).

evidence' of the reality of his simulated bourgeois marriage. If the court fixed Wilde's identity as a homosexual, it followed that his biological reproduction in marriage was a simulation as well. If gross indecency between men was considered unspeakable, much more unspeakable would be the existence of the homosexual as husband and father.

Summary and Conclusion

We can hardly distinguish between Wilde's game and the games society played with him. Wilde and the producer of *Patience* collaborated in constructing the pose of an aesthete in the United States. Students played with Wilde's pose as a professor of aesthetics by imitating the satire of the aesthete. Wilde assumed the pose of a gentleman and played down their masquerade as caricature. In the trials, Wilde's opponents beat him at his own game of simulation. They 'proved' that his pose as an effeminate decadent and sodomite generated vice. However, the condemnation of the husband and father as a homosexual marked his marriage as a perfect mimicry. As the legal authorities proscribed Wilde's reproduction of homosexual young men, they turned his biological reproduction into a simulation. The suspicion that Wilde simulated the husband and the father could be extended by analogy to other Victorian men, undermining the notion of the traditional family as a stronghold against moral corruption and degeneration. In dealing with Wilde, society paradoxically reproduced simulation in order to contain simulation. Society reproduced the aesthete in order to contain the reproduction of the aesthete (in the cases of the opera and the students), and it reproduced the posing sodomite (in the trials) in order to contain the reproduction of homosexuals and their simulation of biological reproduction.

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