AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

OSCAR WILDE A PREDECESSOR OF MODERN SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES: PERFORMATIVITY, SIMULATION AND CONSUMERISM.

by
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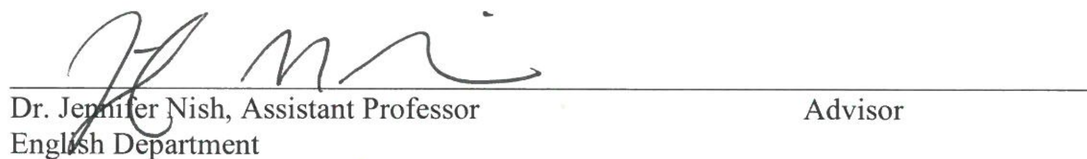

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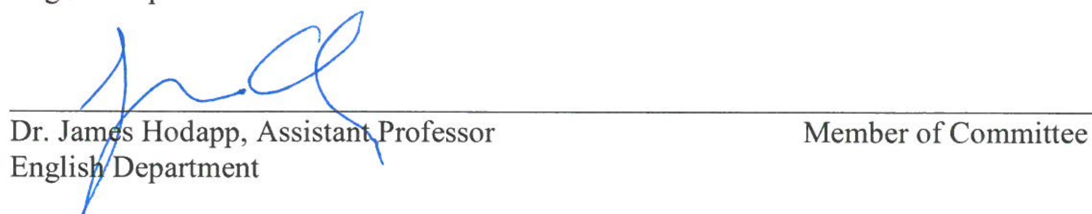

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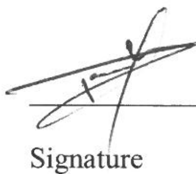

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Tanite Tany Chahwan for Master of Arts
Major: English

Title: Oscar Wilde a Predecessor of Modern Social Media Practices: Performativity, Simulation and Consumerism.

Modern technology and social media practices seemingly commodify the modern subject, turning his life into an endless cycle of performativity. Oscar Wilde, a self-declared aesthete back in the 1880's, launched himself into a conference tour in America, to agglomerate a public, make himself into a celebrity by portraying a caricature based on himself (Bunthorne from the play cowritten by Gilbert and Sullivan). The simulation and performativity he was subject of, even with the very restricted media at the time, show that the modern practices were pre-existent in some sorts, and are just embedded in a capitalistic context, and not woven or forced by technology. People use whatever is available to perform; they create an audience, a stage, and write a role for themselves, whether the tools are advanced or not. They simulate the character that they think they want to be, or that will attract societal attention. The cycle of performativity has therefore always been at play.

I will refer to Baudrillard's simulacra and simulation theory, and Austin and Butler's performativity theories among others, to link Oscar Wilde as a predecessor of online social media performativity, mostly by relating his endeavors to modern practices embedded in online performativity, simulation and consumerism.

In addition, I have written, directed and produced a short movie that visualizes the mentioned concepts: "Mimesis".

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CHAPTER 1

OSCAR WILDE AND SIMULATION

1.1 Introduction

The web 2.0 platforms seemingly add a certain level of performativity to the subject's habitual life. The modern subject is constantly connected to an online audience, a group of "others" (viewers) that in their turn, share, comment, like and upload content themselves. This online "performativity", I argue, is linked to the way people fashion and portray themselves in society. Not only that, but the use of photography and its increased popularity over the years has allowed for a sort of simulation that has eased the "subject" into self-commodification.

Oscar Wilde, born Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde on the 16th of October 1854, was an Irish playwright, novelist, essayist, and poet (Pearson 18). Wilde became known even before having authored works such as "The Picture of Dorian Gray" the novel, and plays such as *Salome, The Importance of Being Earnest, Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance,* and *An Ideal Husband*. Wilde was a self-made man who gained fame via his ostentatious performativity. He had worked hard to make a name for himself in England, and especially in America where he went on a conference tour as a leading "Professor of the Aesthetes" right after graduating from Oxford (Morris 18).

Oscar Wilde, an author/playwright, therefore used his performativity to launch his career, simulating and distributing his fabricated persona via photographs, even though his line of work was not directly linked to having his image spread. Performativity and

simulation had already been prevalent in theatres and show-business in the late eighteen hundreds; actors have always relied on simulating roles in productions, in fact, they were paid for it. Showmen such as Houdini and cowboy "Buffalo Bill", who toured, were already using used photography to advertise themselves and their performances. But the latter are especially blatant examples; in their line of work; conveying a certain brand image and promoting themselves was expected. Thus, Wilde is a very interesting subject to be compared to the modern media user. He used the available media's advantage at the time (1882-1883) to promote himself as an "aesthete", and to later pave his way into his already established intellectual fame by authoring books and plays. He "performed" without being a performer, conveying the blurred limits between theatrical performance and the performativity of everyday life, hence putting to question the degree of agency one has over utterances, simulation and photography. These matters go hand in hand with the growing popularity of social media and the forming as well as the promoting of an online self via photography. An average online user can, through democratic "platforms" that allow him to reach a vast online audience, "fake it till he makes it". The user "performs" his simulated identity to grasp online fame by gathering up followers, likes, etc. In addition, this case-study will allow us to think through "authenticity" of identity, the presence of an "original" self and a "public" self, and their interrelation.

Although Wilde later became a gay icon, made infamous by the fact that he was imprisoned in 1895 and convicted of sodomy and gross indecency (Ellmann 474), that is not the aspect of Wilde that I would like to focus on. However, just for the sake of clarification, Wilde was taken to court after suing his lover's (Alfred Douglas') father, the

marquees of Queensbury, for libel. The Marquees had left a note in one of Wilde's usual restaurants, in which he wrote: "To Oscar Wilde, posing sodomite" (Holland 300). Oscar Wilde, having worked his whole life towards establishing himself as one of the Victorian elite with an impeccably aesthetic image, found the need to defend himself in order to maintain what he had long striven for in what could be a "dangerous" Victorian society that disapproves of homosexuality (sodomy being punishable by law). Oscar Wilde's life ended slowly after his image became undone. He had spent a lifetime trying to build up a brand image tied to luxury, wit and aestheticism, and with those trials, that aesthetic image ended up being covered by what society perceived as hideous crimes. Even though it would be interesting to see how his image branding caused his demise, especially when his identity was so much linked to the "aesthetic" image portrayed, my thesis will focus on the agency behind creating this identity and not the consequences of having to live up to one's image or fabricated persona.

A lot of scholars have studied Oscar Wilde's texts, the latter being plays, novels or critical essays, but very few explore his identity as a living work of art, a performance, a fiction of his own making. Some of the few who partially focused on his identity are Regenia Gagnier, Roy Morris, Jr., and Kerry Powell.

Regenia Gagnier, in her book *Idylls of the Market Place*, targets his circulating image as a pre-modern marketing device. Gagnier describes Wilde as someone very marketing savvy, since he used all means necessary to promote himself after studying the needs of a society that can be prepared to welcome him.

Roy Morris, Jr., in *Declaring his Genius*, focuses on Wilde's American tour- which was basically the step that launched him as a literary persona. He recounts all the small stories that were published about Wilde, and all the performative remarks and retorts that got saved in the memory of the public and that helped puzzle together the image of the "sunflower holding-long haired-velvet suit and knee breeches wearing-self-proclaimed aesthete". Morris also mentions all the interviews, the caricatures, the social dinners, gatherings, appearances, famous encounters and conferences, the ups and downs that helped America shape Oscar Wilde, and the impact this had on his persona throughout his later career back in England.

Kerry Powell, in *Acting Wilde: Victorian sexuality, Theater and Wilde*, focuses on how Wilde was performing his identity and sexuality. Wilde obviously loved acting, as the theme comes up in most of his texts, especially "performing authenticity". Although Powell does mention Sarony's photograph of Wilde that was widely circulated while he was on his American tour, the author mostly focuses on how the playwright fashioned and expressed himself through his characters, and studies the evolution of drafts of Wilde's work in order to analyze what finally saw the light and what was, on the contrary, repressed. The essence of Powell's book is that even though Wilde's performativity allowed him some freedom from society's prison, it didn't grant him that, and the proof is in his lived-out prison years.

Since I do not intend to focus on Wilde's literary persona, the theatrical aspect of his plays, or just the marketing strategies he used, but, instead, on his "performativity" of a persona that he fabricated and simulated in a consumeristic context, I will use Morris'

retellings of the American conferences, Powell's study of Wilde's performativity via the public, and Gagnier's marketing analogies to reroute them into three main categories: Performativity, simulation, and consumerism. I would like to add, considering the said research and given Baudrillard's theory of simulation, that Oscar Wilde fell into the entrapment of simulation. Following through his life and texts, and mostly his use of self-image, I will argue that his authenticity became at stake as soon as he imitated a caricature of himself ("Bunthorne" from the play "Patience" By Gilbert and Sullivan), and accepted to set out to America to "proclaim aestheticism" and make good money. Simulation through "mimesis" is also set in motion since Oscar Wilde imitates a pre-existent version of himself (Bunthorne).

When aware that an audience is watching, the subject chooses what to say or do, depending on the reaction desired. Since his activity and identity is, to an extent, being curated, a facet chosen from his persona is accentuated, and the "self" edges towards simulation. Wilde did manage to make himself known; after a harsh battle, he conquered the hearts and the minds of many and spread the seeds of his aesthetic empire. However, it was at the cost of being life-bound to an image, and a cycle of performativity and simulation that he could never escape from.

In one part of my thesis, I will retrace Oscar Wilde's behavior (actions and statements), as well as his works, to analyze them in the light of photography theories and performativity theories. I will also use Baudrillard's simulation theory to question the role of "original" and "copy" especially since the "copying" is via "mimesis", Wilde's portrayal of his own caricatures. In a second part, I will use the established analysis to help

tie the example of Oscar Wilde as a predecessor of modern online media simulation and later compare it to Essena O'Neill's case, a social media influencer who quit social media, describing her posts on Instagram as "not real". In modern society, social media users (more specifically Instagram and Facebook users), create narratives that portray curated versions of themselves online through shared pictures, videos and attributed captions. These modern practices of performativity and self-representation tied to the web 2.0 platforms are not exactly newly formed, even though the technological advances might have made these practices more practical and wide-spread. I will use the example of Oscar Wilde, who applied these as self-advertising methods, to historicize them. Wilde, in fact, by merging societal gossip, appearances at luncheons, the power of photography and the then-available media (newspaper articles), as well as performativity through attire and locution, managed self-advertising and promoted self-consumerism. Social media use, facilitated by smartphones, which just as easily allow the taking and sharing of enhanced pictures, also enforces the same processes. More object than subject, the modern self thus becomes the essence of online entertainment and consumption.

1.2 Performativity

Before the creation of media such as television (and later reality TV) and social media, Oscar Wilde was already "performing" in his everyday life without being a stage performer or actor himself. Wilde was used to journalists being around, following his every move, interviewing him about his actions, his thoughts, his perceptions and hopes, reporting on the way in which he sat down, spoke, what he wore and what he ate. Wilde's

utterances, his actions, his letters and appearances highlight his performativity. The author's one liners and flashy comments were always reported and contributed to creating his revered character. From the very famous: "I have nothing to declare but my Genius" (from which Roy Morris, Jr.'s book title *Declaring his Genius* was inspired), to lesser known witty remarks, what is certain is that Wilde always made sure his retorts were heard, maintaining the relationship between performer and audience.

Combining Austin's definition of "performativity" to Butler's rendition of it, my take on performativity becomes the acts and utterances that one consciously curates and chooses to display via society as an audience to create a persona/identity. Given the fact that Oscar Wilde is a gay icon, and that the "aesthetic dandy" that he modeled was one that opposed to set norms of masculinity especially in a Victorian era (England) and in a post-war America, it feels necessary to mention Judith Butler's gender performativity theory. Butler affirms that gender is separate, created by society, must operate under constraints and regulations of cultural expectations, and, therefore, is performative.

> "The performance of a gender is also compelled by norms that I do not choose. I work within the norms that constitute me. I do something with them. Those norms are the condition of my agency, and they also limit my agency…gender performativity is not just drawing on the norms that constitute, limit, and condition me; it's also delivering a performance within a context of reception, and I cannot fully anticipate what will happen" (Shippers 345).

Although I do agree with the notion that social performances can only take place under the umbrella of pre-set societal norms, I do not want to be restricted by the idea that

there is no “self” outside of gender: “The ‘I’ neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within the matrix of gender relations themselves” (Butler, “Bodies” 7). I chose not to apply gender theory, but partially use Butler’s performativity in my thesis, because I want to focus on Wilde’s performativity through his use of media as a catalyst for fame. The application of gender performativity theories via Wilde’s case would lead to an extensive study of the evolution of his gender performance, and that would be an entirely different research topic of its own. I would like to add though, that during his American conference days specifically (1882), Wilde was just focused on gaining popularity and accumulating wealth. He flirted with actresses openly, and dedicated time for his female fans. He even wed Constance Lloyd, a wealthy young woman, in 1884 when he returned to England, with whom he had two sons. It wasn’t till the 1890’s that Wilde became promiscuously gay, and took up Alfred Douglas as his lover (Ellmann 98).

The author/playwright knew that his utterances would be heard and reported, and to some extent become published, and that this would work towards the end of making him famous; he moreover counted on it. The notion of Wilde’s utterances being in themselves performative via an audience expands on philosopher J. L. Austin’s theory that all utterances perform actions, even apparently constative ones; this is better explained through the following three-level framework involving: locution, the actual words spoken; illocutionary force, what the speaker is attempting to do in uttering the locution; and the perlocutionary effect, the actual effect the speaker has on the interlocutor by uttering the locution (Austin 133).

Wilde's mission at the time of his conference tour in America was a self-campaign, an advertising tour for aestheticism. Being a "professor of the aesthete", a playwright and an author, it was easy for him to use the weight of his words, his "illocutionary force", to achieve the celebrity status he desired. After all, he was on a journey throughout which his main concern was to find "the best way to nurture his carefully cultivated image as an artist and make an immediate impression on all he met" (Morris 9). I will look more closely then at Oscar Wilde's use of words and the "perlocutionary effect" they have had.

As soon as Wilde graduated from Oxford, he attributed to himself the title of "Professor of the Aesthetes" (Morris 11). "Aestheticism", as an intellectual and art movement, supported the emphasis of aesthetic values more than social-political themes for literature, fine art, music and other arts. Art from this movement focused more on being beautiful rather than having a deeper meaning (i.e. 'Art for Art's sake'). Its merging of themes of perverse sexuality or cruelty and violence to an aesthetically pleasing form shockingly dismantled what many Victorians felt were necessary: natural lines drawn between aesthetic beauty and repellent or 'ugly' morality. Therefore, Aestheticism, a new art movement on the rise in the 19th century, caused very much of a stir in Victorian society whose mainstream culture saw art and literature as a means of self-improvement or a spur to good works. Wilde, by associating himself with this new daring fad, pulled a bold publicity stunt. Professor of the Aesthetes' "illocutionary force" was meant to engage Oscar Wilde's name in controversy and societal gossip. Consequently, Wilde quickly became a celebrity, even Queen Victoria herself took notice of him (Morris 14). The

perlocutionary effect was thus in sync with Wilde's intentions. His performativity, carried out to fit the mold of an "aesthete", had succeeded in making him famous.

Although in 1881 Wilde was dabbling in poetry and pushing some pieces at his own expense, his chief artistic creation, at the time, remained himself. Wilde crafted carefully prepared witticisms that he dropped into conversation with seeming spontaneity at London dinner parties, some of which were: "I can resist everything but temptation", "nothing succeeds like excess", "a little sincerity is a dangerous thing" or "I am not young enough to know everything" (Morris 17). In a sense, he was a true performance artist, rehearsing his own written role and later producing it *vis-à-vis* a selected audience. In fact, he tried his best to agglomerate a public. Wilde went everywhere, attended gallery openings, plays (planting himself at the front of the house firmly for maximum exposure), dances, recitals, sporting events, and operas, but he gave the most importance to dinner parties. It was at one of these parties that Wilde first crossed swords with the celebrated librettist W.S Gilbert who grumbled: "I wish I could talk like you. I'd keep my mouth shut and claim it as a virtue". The sparks of feud were then spread out by Wilde who was quick to respond with his signature wit: "Ah that would be selfish! I could deny myself the pleasure of talking but not to others the pleasure of listening" (Morris 18). Here again, Wilde's illocutionary force brought attention to him. Gilbert, fueled by his encounter with Wilde, later attempted to embarrass him in his play *Patience* co-written with Sullivan. The theatrical piece was mainly about "Bunthorne", an aesthete adored by all the girls in the village except one. It ridicules the main character by denouncing his posing and making him confess, in a scene when left alone, that his aestheticism is a sham. Their strategy

failed as Wilde whole heartedly embraced the "Bunthorne" character intended to mock him. He even attended a performance of the show in full costume, acknowledging the cheers and gibes of fellow theatergoers with a wave and a bow. He rather took the play as a sign of advancement in his fame agenda; in his logic, "The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about" (Morris 18). This feud gave him more than temporary publicity, it presented him with the big opportunity that he was waiting for. When "Patience" opened in America in September 1881, its producer, Richard d'Oyly Carte, offered to pay all of Wilde's expenses and split the profits evenly with him from a twenty-city speaking tour. Wilde agreed, immediately sensing the possibilities of self-promotion; his new audience would be a whole continent. Wilde took this challenge head on, and prepared for it like it were a new performance. He read up on Charles Dickens's tours of America and attended lectures on the former colonies at the British Museum. He even took private elocution lessons from his American-born actor friend Hermann Vezin, to whom he specified: "I want a natural style with a touch of affectation" (Morris 19). His performance had to be correspondingly altered to fit the Americas, the content which he had already prepared had to be voiced in the appropriate manner to transmit the image he was aiming for and ensue with the calculated outcome.

The playwright consciously "prepared" for the role he was about to take on so agency in performativity is inferred. Wilde put thought into everything that would reach the audience: his appearance (wardrobe and costumes), his voice (elocution classes), and his new utterances would all be tailor-made to fit this new audience he had researched and was preparing for. Wilde set sail for the U.S on the steamship Arizona in 1883 (Morris 21).

He began performing even before he set foot on American soil, letting it be known to others on board that he was somewhat disappointed in the performance of the Atlantic Ocean. He supposedly told a shipmate: “I am not very pleased with the Atlantic, it is not so majestic as I expected. The sea seems tame to me. The roaring ocean does not roar.” The quote was reported and made headlines throughout the English-speaking world; “Mr. Wilde disappointed with Atlantic”, a few days later a letter even appeared in the Pall Mall Gazette stating, “I am disappointed in Mr. Wilde” signed “The Atlantic Ocean” (Morris 23). Wilde was so savvy with his rhetoric that he knew exactly what to say to let his words echo to land. He relied yet again on controversy to make headlines, giving a preview to the American audience even before reaching them physically.

Powell and Gagnier agree that on his arrival to America, Oscar Wilde became Bunthorne, the “Pallid and lank young man” in Patience, whether in regards to the journalists waiting for him (Morris 24) or his shipmates (Powell 15). He had been absorbed into the Gilbert and Sullivan’s script that caricatured him and aestheticism more generally. Bunthorne was based on the pre-American tour Oscar Wilde, but since this caricature distorted his character, and Wilde ended up adapting the portrayed character throughout his conference days, we can assume that the “original” or “authentic” Oscar Wilde got sidetracked, giving agency to the new fabricated and simulated “Oscar Wilde” persona. Wilde, then, by simulating the symptoms of a simulation of himself (Bunthorne), distorted his function as an original. According to Baudrillard, to simulate is to “feign to have what one doesn't have” (2), but simulating is more complex than that, because there is a difference between simulating and pretending. Simulation, in its essence threatens the

difference between the "true" and the "false," the "real" and the "imaginary" (Baudrillard 4). Wilde had already created a new character for himself by merging Bunthorne and other mainstream representations of aesthetes, and keeping some “Wilde” traits such as his ability to handle his liquor, his sense of humor, and his witty responses. The performative outcome had to keep up with the public’s demand. Goffman, in his essays on performativity, speaks about how “ordinary social intercourse is itself put together as a scene is put together, by the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies. (…) All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify” (Goffman 72). In the case of Oscar Wilde, that difficulty in specifying the difference between his authentic self, if there is one, and his performativity is at an even higher level. Since his identity is mediatized and “broadcasted”, one would wonder how/if there is a separation between his world and his “stage”. Following Wilde’s departure, an even more famous quote soon began making the rounds. When a customs officer asked him if he had anything to declare, Wilde supposedly replied “I have nothing to declare except my genius” (Morris 25). It was in fact the perfect opening line for what would amount to a long running one-man play written, produced, directed and starring Oscar Wilde as a highly-stylized version of himself. Wilde’s retorts kept conforming to his ostentatious persona and they were so amusing to people that they were repeatedly reported and published: when Wilde reached St Louis, the flood-swollen Mississippi river was yellowish-brown due to the mud and was surging over its banks, “No well-behaved river ought to act this way” remarked Wilde from the train. (Morris 118). When in Pop Wyman’s namesake saloon, Wilde saw a morose piano-player sitting in the

corner beneath a sign that read: “Don’t shoot the Pianist; He’s Doing His Best.” Wilde’s comment was that it was “the only rational method of art criticism he had ever come across” (Morris 155). These one liners proved to be a very efficient way to keep the public entertained and reach a good amount of people; they obviously don’t take much time to memorize; they are witty and concise, and therefore, could easily be relayed from ear to ear.

Wilde’s performativity was very theatrical; it depended on the presence of an audience. As Potolsky put it, “Theatre is incomplete, almost unimaginable, without an audience.” (Potolsky 74). Mimesis, from its very origins in Greek thought, connected ideas about artistic representation to more general claims about human social behavior, and to the ways in which we know and interact with others, and with our environment. The word mimesis originally refered to the physical act of miming or mimicking something. Plato regarded mimesis as a dangerous and corrupting imitation of reality. Theatrical mimesis does not rely on the distinction between a real original and an illusory copy but on a certain kind of interaction between actor and audience (Potolsky 74) and that is the difference between mimesis and simulacra. Whilst simulation draws a distinct line between original and copy, theatrical mimesis is a more open notion of unbounded reciprocity between actor and audience that creates the subject. There is no original when it comes to theatrical mimesis, but an on-going performance. Wilde was constantly interacting with an audience, and had scripted his behavior and utterances on the basis that he was being seen and heard. Hence, Wilde becomes a perfect example for theatre theorist Josette Feral’s argument that theatrical mimesis is the result of a ‘perceptual dynamics’ of seeing and being seen (105).

Theatrical mimesis can turn a pedestrian into an audience, or even into a performer, by blurring the line of stage performance and integrating it into every day life. Theatrical mimesis can therefore happen anywhere and anytime. Wilde was not on a theatrical stage; he was out in the world, performing as himself, as an aesthete, as Wilde/Bunthorne. The world was his stage. This brings us to one of the most influential western metaphors, the theatrum mundi, or theatre of the world, that imagines life as a play, with the world as a stage, each person an actor, and god as the all seeing audience. If all of life is a mimetic spectacle, then we are all perpetually performing.

The thought of constantly performing in everyday life is obviously not a new concept. In fact, Evreinov stands behind the notion that this theatrical principle governs all manners of human behavior. “Every time we approach a mirror, pose for a photograph or daydream, we play actor and spectator at once” (Evreinov 51). But if we are always performing, then who is the stage director? Does the subject have any agency in the matter? Or are we mere puppets? Evreinov pushes Aristotle’s claim that imitation is natural to its limits: theatre is not a means to another end (pleasure or learning), but an inherent biological drive towards transformation and differentiation (141). Following through with this argument, the subject, therefore, does have a sort of agency, since he is actively taking part in this social performativity. Undoubtedly though, since it is in the subject’s “nature” to imitate and perform, one cannot claim that the answer to agency via performativity is so simple. If one is aware that he is constantly performing and imitating because it is in his “nature” to do so, does he have the ability to cease performing? And how aware is the subject of social performativity, if it is so conventionalized and

naturalized since even naturalness itself becomes a role, and the most challenging one at that, as it demands "the unquestioning participation of both the actor and the audience" (Evreinov 141)? Butler's performativity theory would certainly agree with identity being a changing role dictated by an audience, since it does not accept a stable and coherent gender identity. Butler, in fact, insists that gender is a discontinuous, stylized repetition of acts that construct an appearance of a substantial identity, a sort of performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief ("Performative" 520). Austin's notion of performativity echoes this constant play between audience and actor. What he calls locution, the actual words spoken, is uttered based on its illocutionary force, what the speaker is attempting to do in uttering the locution, which is directly linked to the perlocutionary effect: the actual effect the speaker has on the interlocutor by uttering the locution, the interlocutor being none other than the audience. These theorists have a similar prevalent concept: identity is always construed, and depends on the presence of an audience.

Was Wilde fully aware of his performativity when he was consciously "preparing" for his tour? And to what level did he have agency over his actions and identity? Other than working on his elocution and conference tour material, Wilde also had his tailor make him a "bottle green overcoat trimmed in otter fur, a round sealskin hat, and a complete stage outfit, featuring all the visual flourishes of the reigning London aesthete down to a pair of patent-leather dancing slippers, with silver bows on top" (Morris 19). If Americans expected to see the real-life Bunthorne, Wilde intended to play the part thoroughly. This was not the only instance where Wilde acted as his own *costumier* and art director, adding

to the multi-dimensionality of his performativity. When he was still an undergraduate student, he attended the opening of Grosvenor Gallery in London in May 1877, while wearing a custom-made bronze colored suit, tailored to look like a cello with the instrument's hour glass outline stitched to the back, a design that had come to him in a dream (Morris 17). Wilde was used to being the center of attention, in fact he had always yearned for it, and he knew just what to do to turn heads. Powell emphasizes Wilde's use of knee-breeches and silk stockings (echoing the Gilbert and Sullivan play) to "ridicule all deviation from conventional, bourgeois masculinity" as part of Wilde's conscious strategy to "subvert Patience, its anti-aestheticism, its mockery of himself—from within" (19). And that is why Wilde framed his conferences mostly by presenting himself physically as Bunthorne, the main character brought to life and wearing the full costume, with knee breeches, most of the time.

Wilde now had the responsibility to keep up with his role. Every public interaction had to be staged in some sorts with a calculated costume and script. In the world of theater, "costume has agency as intermediary between performer and the spectator, not only through a visual response, but also a sensory one […]. It draws attention to the body, by what it reveals or conceals, through fit, by the way it organizes the body's composition and proportion" (Barbieri 286). Thus, the costume articulates a certain performativity. Wilde dressed a certain way to achieve a certain relationship with the audience. Most of all, he wanted to be related visually to the aestheticism that he came to preach about. Rather than style over content, style is content – aesthetics are an embodied, shared knowledge in a different way from text (Prown 210). Oscar Wilde recognized that surface is not the

antithesis to depth, that form makes content, that manner is matter: "Style, not sincerity, is the vital thing" (the Importance of Being Earnest). To choose a style is to engage in a performance, an act of willed self-definition, to be making a conscious choice. From our writing to our clothing, we make ourselves, our characters, through such choices. We fashion ourselves; everything we do reflects and constitutes who we are.

This costume that Wilde so proudly put on, that he used as a tool, a brand signature of aestheticism, was often used against him as a tool for mockery. The clothes that Wilde wore as accessories became a symbol for the man wearing them. At the Boston music hall where Wilde was giving one of his conferences, "sixty Harvard men marched down the center aisle in pairs all carrying sunflowers and wearing Wildean costumes of knee breeches black stockings wide spreading cravats and shoulder length wigs" (Morris 81). But Wilde had been warned of a potential prank and so he calmly waited for them to sit down, then walked on stage wearing long trousers and a conservative coat and 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" (Morris 82). This incident could serve as a reminder for many tropes. First of all, Wilde's aesthetic costume, or more appropriately Bunthorne's costume, had become a signifier. Wilde's identity was tied to his costume at this point. To ridicule the costume would be to ridicule the man, or so obviously thought these Harvard men. On another hand, Wilde calling them out as caricatures brings on a certain paradox, for how could he blame them for using the aesthete's costume as caricature when Bunthorne's costume, which he had adopted as his own for the conference tour, was initially part of a caricature. The sole difference would lie

in the fact that Wilde had been able to play the caricature to his benefit (Patience), whilst here, by deserting his outfit, he would be more able to disown the humiliation intended by this caricature by de-appropriating the costume as part of his identity. Even though the instances were scarce, Wilde did let go of his aesthete's costume when he wanted peace of mind. Once, while he was on a train on his way to California, onlookers were turning up on train platforms hoping to catch a glimpse of him as he passed. A tall fellow in knee breeches at the rear of the train smiled and waved at them, but it was not Wilde; instead, it was John Howson who was playing Bunthorne in a troupe which was performing "Patience" out West. Meanwhile, Wilde was traveling in simple clothes, a common outfit in that area at the time: black suit, brown pants, plain scarf, no jewelry and a sombrero (Morris 132). It is as though, since identity and costume were so blurred, Wilde could easily undress himself and step out from his role. The ease with which it would seem Wilde took on different roles, whether it was Bunthorne (Gilbert and Sullivan's Patience), Postlethwaite (DuMaurier caricatures in Punch), a dandy full of witticisms impressing reporters, or simply an ostentacious aesthete that puts on extravagant costumes to catch the public's attention, this multitude of character traits puts to question the presence of an "authentic" Wilde self. Was there ever an original presence that became blurred and tarnished as he took on these simulations and roles? These questions could have a range of answers, but again, it would depend on the notion of "selfhood".

The self according to Goffman is a "product of a scene that comes off, and is not the cause of it". Selfhood then becomes a product of the relationship between audience and actor; the public self is not a less original copy of the private self but a copy generated by

social performances and therefore collaboratively manufactured (253). Thus, there is no "original" or "authentic" self to begin with. One constructs himself depending on the other; it is an everchanging societal product. Wilde then is not to blame if he exhibited a mimicking of pre-existent selves that were tailored to him, since the performance of the self depends on the audience. In the aesthete's case it was obvious that he gave the viewers what they expected and yearned for. Selfhood and identity are socially constructed, based on who we imitate, rather than fixed qualities (Potolsky 125).

When his conference days were over, Wilde did not cease to be performative in his quest for fame and societal recognition, he just traded in his popular image for a new modernized one. He had launched himself in the Americas, and now it was time to maintain the status he had successfully simulated. His trademark green overcoat that he wore in the streets of London gained the same symbolic status as his long hair and knee breeches in America. He was still a walking talking billboard through his reinvention of himself through the popular image. Our playwright had managed to create the funds needed to produce and write his plays and novels, but it would not be "Wilde" to hide behind his work. His identity, or the performance of the latter, remained throughout his career his ever-evolving main artistic oeuvre.

1.3 Media

Since the originality of Oscar Wilde, as a new aesthetic phenomenon, was propagated through imagery (posed photographs, drawn caricatures, portrayal in newspaper articles), one must keep in mind the "possibility of originality's own most proper non-truth, of its pseudo-truth reflected in the icon, the phantasm or the simulacrum" (Derrida 1733). Wilde's identity was being fragmented and simulated time and time again. How so?

Wilde declared himself a professor of the aesthetes, and deliberately dressed in a very ostentatious manner throwing witticisms left and right. This identity that he created was used by the media and turned into a caricature of all aesthetes at times, while in other instances, it was especially directed to mock Wilde himself. George Du Maurier of Punch Magazine famously illustrated Wilde as "Jellaby Postlethwaite" (fig. 1). His most famous drawing was titled "aesthetic midday meal" picturing Postlethwaite seated, and in front of him a glass of water for his fresh-cut lily, saying: "I have all I require".

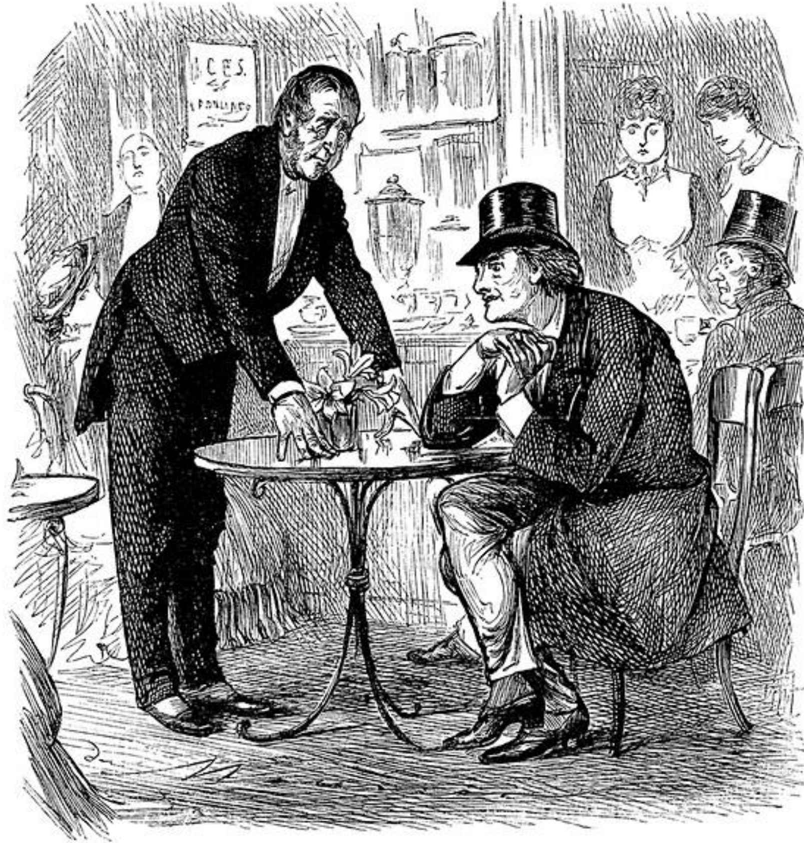

Figure 1- "An Aesthetic Midday Meal" by George Du Maurier- Punch Magazine, 1880

In another famous drawing, he depicted Postlethwaite outside a public bathhouse by the sea, refusing to "take a dip in the briny", explaining that he never bathes on the account of seeing himself so foreshortened in the water (Morris 14). Another Punch editor, Frank Burnand, directed a comedy, The Colonel, whose fake poet, Lambert Streyke, was clearly modeled after Wilde. It was written to ridicule the foolish aesthetic people who dress in such "absurd manner, with loose garments, puffed sleeves, great hats, and carrying

peacock's feathers, sunflowers and lilies" (Morris 14). Wilde, nevertheless, remained unfazed, "Caricature is one of the compliments that mediocrity pays to those who are not mediocre". The image of Oscar Wilde became a symbol for aestheticism; targeting Wilde's ways, his attire and mannerisms, through caricatures, was therefore a way to point out the "absurdity" of the whole aesthetic courant. Clearly, to ridicule the professor of the aesthetes would contribute to bringing down his aesthetic empire. Wilde's "beautiful" and "fashionable" image was turned into an imbecilic portrait. (See figures 2-3)

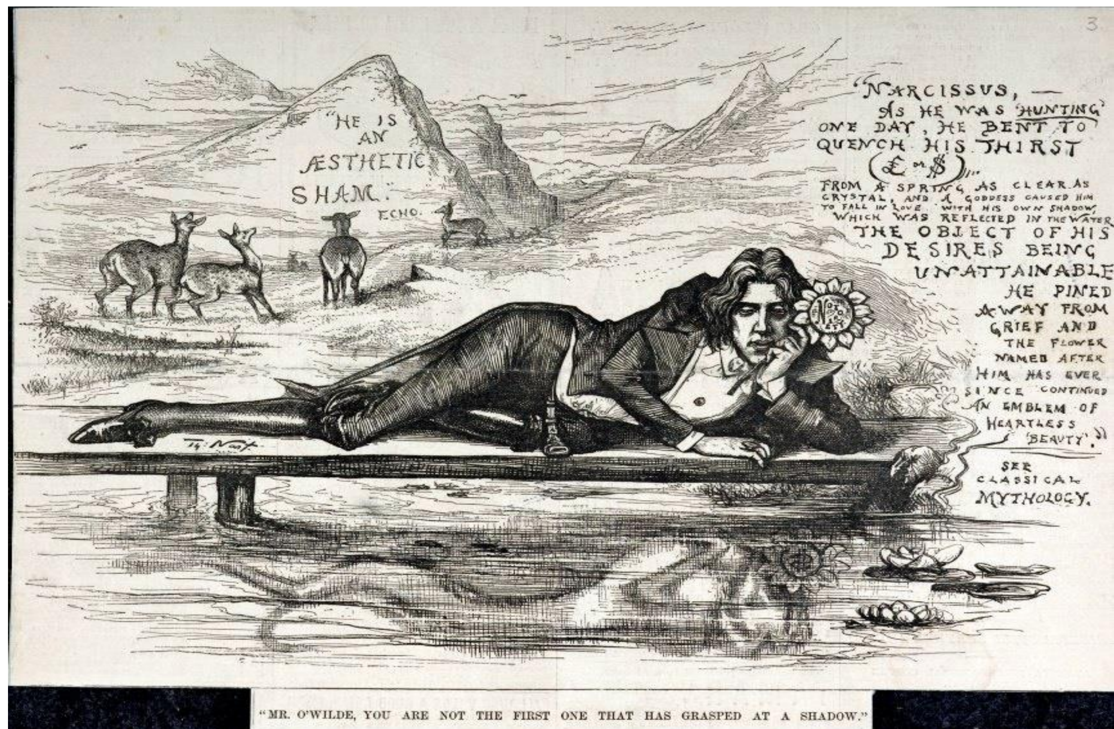

Figure 2- Oscar Wilde caricatured as Narcissus, in love with his own reflection by James Edward Kelly 1894.

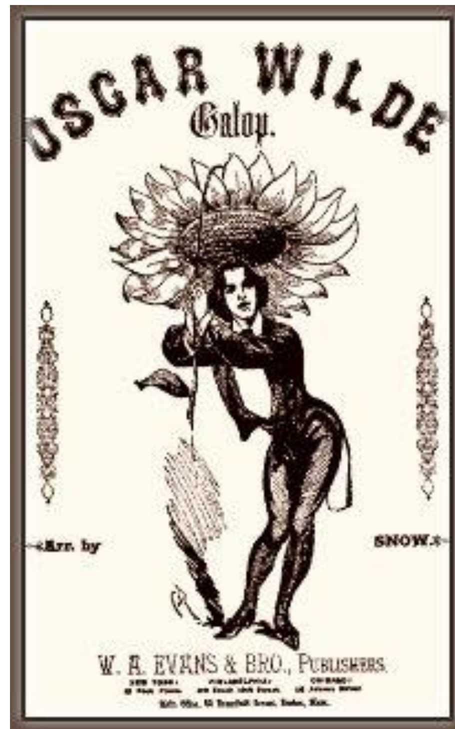

Figure 3- Poster advertising the "*Oscar Wilde Galop",* one of several topical dance pieces which capitalized on Wilde's arrival in America.

Wilde seemed to welcome these satirical representations of himself with open arms. His statements to reporters usually conveyed a sturdy self-confidence: "My friends and I went to see the first night of Patience and had all manner of fun"; "If the true artist is not a mere sham, he cannot be distributed by any caricature or exaggeration"; and "I have never felt pained at all by his caricatures or those of anyone else, and I think I have enjoyed them fully as much as anyone" (Powell 15). In an article titled "A Man of Culture Rare," written by Rochester Democrat for the Chronicle in February 1882, Wilde is quoted to have said "You go and look at the statue of the Venus de Milo and you know that is an exquisitely beautiful creation. Would it change your opinion in the least if all the

newspapers in the land should pronounce it a wretched caricature? Not at all.”. Even though Wilde tried to brush off the importance he gave to media and specifically newspaper articles, he ended up contradicting himself by saying that he doesn’t pay much attention to what the American newspapers have to say about him, accusing them of being rude and ill-mannered and spreading lies about him. This was not the last time he denounced ‘the scandalous treatment’ he had received at the hands of an American newspaper, one instance of which stated “a Baltimore sheet, a rag of a newspaper” in an article for the Boston Globe in January 1882 "The Aesthetic Apostle". Gagnier depicts Wilde as a marketing savvy man who “commercialized his ‘genius’ to channeling this spontaneous intelligence into a marketable ‘talent’” (11). The astonishing numbers of popular cartoons, songs, scores, dances—like “The Oscar Wilde Forget-Me-Not Waltzes” in the United States—parodies, novels, stories, essays, apologies, biographies, and tributes that began to flood the market in 1895 proved his ability to advertise himself (Gagnier 52). Personally, I do not consider this to be a direct, calculated result. This back and forth between Wilde being depicted as completely in control, a self-advertising genius who did not care about the publicity he was getting because he truly believed that any publicity is good publicity, and the Wilde that was in constant struggle with trying to maintain agency and control over his image, relays the discrepancies in the aesthete’s agency over his image and identity. Whether in appropriating the Bunthorne costume as a means to prove to the public that there is a difference between the man and the caricature, or in trying to win the journalists over by embodying the figure of the lonely suffering artist who fights for beauty: “our aim is to unite all artists in a brotherhood of art and to draw closer together

those who cultivate the beautiful" (Morris 53), Wilde did not have complete handle over his simulated identity.

Oscar Wilde's identity was also reproduced and consumed in many plays, the most famous became Gilbert and Sullivan's "Patience". The latter played a very important role in the succession of Wilde's life events. The complexity of simulation resides in the blurring of truth and non-truth as they are both born in repetition. As Derrida explained, there can be no truth without repetition, as it is in repetition that the truth is able to reach the senses and make itself known. The eidos (idea) can be repeated by staying close to mneme (memory), logos (words) and phone (voice). But on the other hand, repetition is the very moment of non-truth because it is the "presence of what is gets lost, disperses itself, multiplies itself through mimesis, icons, phantasms, simulacra, etc." A repetition of life becomes a "Death rehearsal" through the "irreducible excess" and through the "play of the supplement" (Derrida 1732). Whereas another man took up his role on a stage, Oscar's identity was therefore "hollowed out by that addition", as it withdrew itself in the "supplement that presented it" (Derrida 1733). The repetition of Oscar Wilde's identity, its reenactment off stage and on-stage, its reproduction through caricatures etc. contributed to the loss of the original/authentic presence. It "hollowed out" Wilde's character, leaving behind only a simulacrum. To be clearer, maybe this simulation was not in process until Wilde agreed to wear Bunthorne's stage outfit in his conference tour in the Americas. Bunthorne's costume, the "supplement" presenting Wilde, became a symbol of Oscar Wilde, later to be relished by his fans as they mimicked his outfit whether for flattery or mocking purposes.

In “Patience”, Bunthorne, adored by all the women in the village except Patience, falls in love with none but the latter. When Grosvernor, an other aesthete, shows up as competition in the village, Bunthorne loses his adoring fans and ends up wanting to win them back. In the end, he is discarded, yet again, as Grosvernor gives up on being an aesthete and all the women become engaged to be wed, while Bunthorne is left alone. This play criticizes Wilde as it picks up on certain terms he is famous for, such as “utter” and other expressions. It also manifestly refers to his consumeristic mannerisms (lilies, sunflowers, Japanese aesthetics). Throughout this play, Wilde is, in effect, being accused of just “performing” for attention: “It's no use; I can't live without admiration”. He is portrayed as not being convinced of anything he says or does. Society is also criticized, as the villagers seem to adore Bunthorne, who has no merit, blindly following what he says. Returning to Derrida, Bunthorne, a “hollowed out copy” of an aesthete, is a preview of what Oscar Wilde actually becomes. By agreeing to wear Bunthorne’s costume and be directly linked to this caricature, he merged the “supplement” with the “original”, condemning any authentic presence to be a mere simulation. Even Powell questionned who was in control at the time of the conferences (15). Who was in control of this “posing”? Wilde himself? Or was it Gilbert and Sullivan and their agents? Wilde’s case was intriguing; nobody knew whether the man should be considered as a marketing genius, or if he was truly just a manipulated puppet. If Wilde’s agency was difficult to trace or prove at the time, one can only try to deduce and analyze in retrospect his behavior, and especially his use of media as a marketing tool.

Besides his literary portrayals, Wilde's photographs had fealty to the tropes of simulation and performativity, as well as the resulting consumerism of identity. Once in New York, Wilde automatically went to Sarony's photography studio. Sarony was a well-known photographer at the time. He focused on artfully posing his subjects, a task he described as a "surrender of self on the part of a sitter" (Morris 36). Paradoxically, Sarony wanted his quarry to feel un-posed, observing that once conscious, the sitter begins to pose, and does so falsely. Since his « posers » were mostly some of the famous personas at the time, this would bring out questions about authenticity and performativity. What could we call true and authentic, and how fine is the line separating performativity from original identity? Wilde already knew which outfits to show off, and in which manner to pose. He changed costumes during the session, starting with his green fur-trimmed overcoat and purple velvet suit, then switching to his famous knee breeches and black silk stalking over patent-leather pumps. (see fig 4-5-6).

Figure 4- Quarter-length portrait of Oscar Wilde by Napoleon Sarony, 1882.

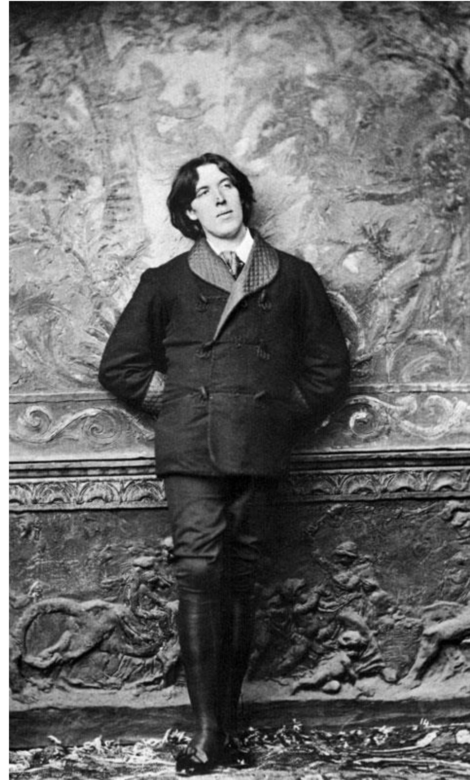

Figure 5- No. 14. Oscar Wilde, full-length portrait by Napoleon Sarony, New York, 1882.

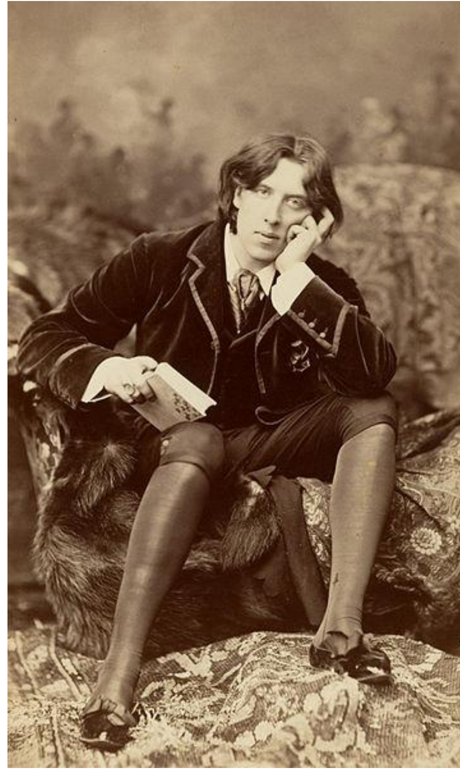

Figure 6- The subject of the lawsuit: *Oscar Wilde No. 18* by Napoleon Sarony, 1882.

In a few hours, Sarony and his assistants made twenty-seven separate photographs of Wilde, a head shot, and a series of sitting and standing positions. Those photographs would later be reproduced, published, and sold, becoming part of advertisements etc. The spread of the aesthete's pictures helped reinforce his fame, giving yet again an image to the public that he would have to live up to. In many cases, people were curious to see the man in the ads, who was wearing out of the ordinary clothing, and giving out an out-of-this-world aura with his seemingly *reveur looks*.

When photography is involved, it invokes a three-role play, featuring the photographer, the subject, and the viewer. Sontag uses two metaphors to concisely convey

her understanding of photographic seeing: “predation” and “voyeurism”. She stands behind the notion that there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. Photographs in their nature violate their subjects by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects (Sontag 6). Sarony, who usually directs his subjects, seemed to have less of an agency when it came to Wilde, as the latter was more than prepared to pose, and already had several costumes lined up. But in agreement with Sontag, when a person perceives that he or she is being observed by another, it results in the diminishing of subjectivity, thus the person becomes an object in the other’s world. Wilde, by becoming a photograph, was coded as “visual evidence” (Sontag 6) of an aesthete. He became known to a lot of people through these simulations of his identity, a representation of what he looked like. Since photographic seeing is therefore always objectifying and predatory, Wilde actively participated in commodifying himself through the then-spreading-medium of photography.

In America, between 1903 and 1917, photography was trying to acquire the aura associated with great art. Ironically however, the age of photography is the period when the concept of originality and the aura associated with it is modulated by reproducibility. As Scruton explains, the paradigm of originality and reproducibilty through photography is created by our encounters with images of desire and truth. Images structure our desire, and hence affect what we perceive as truth because the photograph idealizes and perfects a moment by freezing it in time (5). Consequently, in relation to a subject, a photograph is a photograph of something, it proves that it exists, and it also follows that the subject is, roughly, as it appears in the photograph. There is a relation between the photograph and

the subject, but/and we forget that there is a photographer involved, whose intentions become unimportant and the picture is therefore "recognized at once for what it is-not as an interpretation of reality but as a presentation of how something looked. In some sense looking at a photograph is a substitute for looking at the thing itself" (Scruton 588). The photograph's power then resides in the illusion that it is incapable of representing something that is unreal. Therefore a picture of someone is proof that that person existed and represents what he looked like. "Photography (…) re-mains inescapably wedded to the creation of illusions, to the creation of lifelike semblances of things in the world" (Scruton 602). Hence photography is simulation, simulation that the person x is exactly his image y. The way he appears to be in the photograph then falsely dictates what he is supposed to be in reality. The authentic is consequently substituted in a sly manner by the image. Since photography induces simulation by substituting the real model by its image, it echoes Baudrillard's theory:

> "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself " (Baudrillard 3).

The “territory”, in my thesis’ context, is identity, with the map being photographs, articles, gossip, and literature made to enframe the identity, and later becoming holograms of the identity itself. And there lies the danger of simulation, by effectively blurring the lines of the real and hyperreal. Photography as a medium is simulacrum. Why? Because simulation stems from the “Utopia of the principle of equivalence”. A photograph looks so real that we embrace it as veritable, even though it is but a representation of an object/subject. Hence the sign/symbol masks the presence, and becomes as valuable as the latter. Baudrillard meticulously explained the phases of the image:

In the first phase “it is the reflection of a profound reality” (6); an image can only be that of something that already exists. In the second phase “it masks and denatures a profound reality” (6); at this stage, it is already altering the reality that it is based on just by being a reflection of the original. The third phase envolves the masking of “the absence of a profound reality” (6). The danger, as I previously stated, comes from the *vraisemblance* masking the difference between the reflection and the original that is strayed from, and becomes forgotten, “it has no relation to any reality whatsoever” (6). The image stops being a mere reflection and becomes its own entity with no relation to the original that is forgotten and put aside, it becomes “its own pure simulacrum” (6) at a final phase. It eventually attains the order of simulation by pretending to be what it is not, an authentic, original presence.

Baudrillard warns us about a “plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality - a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity”. Photography helps reproduce the “real” and the referential. In his own words, he calls it a “Panic-stricken production of

the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production (…)" (6). When a real presence becomes translated into a photograph, an object that you can hold in your hands, it is commodified. When simulation and authenticity are mixed, identity becomes a material production, a strategy, especially in a consumerist society, where producing is being. The real becomes a "plethora of myths", the reference merged with the image. Wilde's startegy to conquer the Americas with his performativity intensified this blurring of simulation. Reaching out for so many tools to build an empire built on an aesthetic image, how can one's vision stay clear vis a vis his authenticity, his "original"? The danger of simulation, as previously mentioned, resides in the fact that it replaces the real. Wilde became a living walking simulacrum of himself as well as a commodity. In fact, the case of "Oscar Wilde, No.18" is a flagrant example of Wilde's commodification and apparent loss of agency. An article in the New York Times, "Did Sarony Invent Oscar Wilde", summarized the argument in the supreme court against Sarony's claims of copyright on the photographs "he had merely arranged him, newly arranged something that was already existant" (Powell 25-26). At the time, Sarony was infuriated by the fact that the Burrow-Giles Lithographic Company had marketed unauthorized lithographs of his photograph of Wilde, entitled "Oscar Wilde, No. 18". He had taken the case to court, suing them for copyright infringement. Wilde did not even appear in the case, remaining weirdly detached from this contest over his own posed image and seems to have left no recorded comment or opinion that has survived. Had he purpousefully put his image out there for people to fight over and reap more fame? Was it such a calculated maneuver for him to be so uncaring of the result of this court session

even if it could’ve possibly increased his income? Powell’s take on the moral of “Oscar Wilde, No. 18” was that although a conscious performer, one who desired above all to perform autonomously, Wilde’s American experience was significantly “authored” by others (27). According to the Supreme Court’s online archive, Sarony had won the case, and was dubbed the author of an original work of art, stating that he had chosen the playwright’s costume, suggested his expression, and worked on the background as well as the accessories, and therefore gained exclusive rights over the photographs. In consequence, Wilde was epitomized as a mere object with no agency over the posing that had taken place. Whether it was Richard D’Oyly his agent, or Napoleon Sarony in his photographic studio, or even by Gilbert and Sullivan through their play, Wilde was being molded over and over again, manipulated and assigned roles , and commercialized to profit others. Becoming an object for another is normally an occurrence to be resisted. To defend oneself against objectification would be through “the assertion, through speech and action, of subjectivity” (Steiner 5). Wilde clealry tried to maintain and assert his presence/ subjectivity through the interviews he gave to many newspapers, giving himself the chance to get his words printed and out in the world: backing up his images with his voice. Whether he succeeded in regaining agency over his photographs is a tough question to answer. I do not completely agree with Powell in his saying that Wilde’s experience was always authored by others, though I do believe that there was a constant power struggle over agency. Wilde’s conscious decisions and his overall material success prove that he willingly took on this mimetic process in order to fulfill his wishes for fame and money-making. Even if at times he had lost control and was not able to direct the public and the

journalists with the rigor he had initially wanted, he did succeed in manipulating the public to some extent, and played the roles that he took on intelligently when it served his purposes. He was actively applying mimesis, taking on the roles of his caricatures, and that was not a haphazardous decision.

1.4 Consumerism

Wilde was already a media sensation during his American conference days; even though all he had initially wanted was to make himself known, his fame commoditized him as he became a simulacrum: a symbol of aestheticism. Soon enough, he was beginning to lose agency as he was perceived as an object being sold and advertised as one. Oscar Wilde became the equivalent of lillies and knee-breeches. He was nicknamed the "distinguished lily-consumer", the "apostle of the utter" and the "bosschief English sunflower" (Morris 127). Whether people bought similar clothes because they looked up to him, or whether they were buying the outfits to mock him, regardless, they were participating in the consumption of "aesthetic" or "Wildean" merchandise.

At the outset, when Wilde was still back in England, his motivation to leave for a twenty-city speaking tour was Colonel W.F. Morse's offer to pay all of his expenses and split the profits evenly with him (Morris 19). Thus, consumerism, the want of money, and the want of a luxurious life was the catalyst for Wilde's flamboyant opinions and style. The spread of his fame in America, in retrospect, gave him stature, and more than that, gave him income. But in return, Wilde was being "sold" in many fashions. For example, the photographs that Sarony took of Wilde were sold by the photographer. Wilde's

propagandean use even advertised “trimmed hat department” even when the picture used for the ad represented him bare headed. The purpose was to show how the English renaissance was “fitly represented by its merchandise”. Other Wilde images were used to pitch Straiton and Storm cigars (“too too” a Wildean utterance used as caption to asvertise the cigars-see fig 7) and Piercy’s “esthetic Ice cream and confections”(Morris 37).

Figure 7- Sarony’s lithograph of Wilde used for advertising Straiton and Storms cigars, 1882.

Wilde's pleasure came from the feeling of fulfillment he got from being associated with high society and being pampered by it. But he did not solely rely on the beneficence of others. His Chickering Hall appearance took in more than $1200, which impressed even his canny manager, D'Oyly Carte. Wilde was somehow in denial when it came to the fact that he was commodifying himself and selling himself as live entertainment and aesthetic simulacrum. When criticized about his greed for money, Wilde retaliated by arguing that money-making was essential for art-making (Morris 110). Even though his claims about having art as a prime concern in an industrial context might be convincing to some, Wilde's conferences about "The English Renaissance" were usually about architecture and home decoration and sometimes swerved to incorporate dress code. That said, his lectures plainly promoted the consumption of certain goods, in coordinance with the aesthetic style that he was advocating, a style of fashion that verged towards a style of life. One reporter noted that "Oscar Wilde was getting unaesthetically fat" (Morris 174), his heaviness being a blatent sign of wealth and consumption of food and alcohol, Wilde needed for naught at this point. Mistaking wealth for power, he probably thought that he had full agency over his own life, while in fact, D'Oyly Carte, among other managers, were just as easily selling him as he was selling his conference audience aestheticism. Wilde was smart enough to simultaneously use the opportunities presented to him to advance his theatrical agenda as well, making the time to think of lead actresses for his plays- and make future collaborations with play producers in America. One example would be actress Mary Anderson, whom he gave special attention to because he wanted her to play the lead role in his play "The duchess of Padua" (Morris 193). Despite reports that he considered his tour

a failure, Wilde was, in truth, proud of his accomplishments in North America. In all, he had traveled some 15,000 miles, had appeared in 140 cities and towns from Maine to California, from Canada to Texas, and had personaly earned in expenses at least $5,600, in modern terms nearly $124,000 (Morris 209). Wilde thought that the success of his tour, proved by the amount of money made and the territory covered, certified him to be both a top lecturer and a celebrity. In truth, he had certainly succeded in leaving an impression wherever he went, alternately shocking, amusing, entertaining, and enlightening thousands of post-civil-war-era Amercians and making a good amount of money while at it.

To summarize, Oscar Wilde's performativity was spread out through his utterances, through his costume, wardrobe choices, and his appearances. His whole conference tour was staged in a way to maximize his popularity, and get seats filled in order to go back to England with filled pockets. In order to accomplish the latter, Wilde had to intercept the audience via his performativity; he had to be unique, witty, aesthetic, and mostly entertaining, merging the power of his words (elocutionary force), his looks (costume), and his presence (societal appearances).

Wilde's use of media to spread his fame, even if the then-used media was much less advanced than modern technology, represented the same dangers as modern media since they both allow the possibilty of reproducability. When one is represented, the original cannot be accurately relayed—it is always a simulation that gets through, an image. The power of photography helped dismantle Wilde as an original presence, being backed up by numerous caricatures that deformed his persona. Even the words and articles of the reporters left an impact on Wilde's image. The original stopped being able to shape

the simulation, and to some extent the simulation took a hold of the original, bending it to the will of the audience/public and turning it into a commodity, as Baudrillard explains in "Simlulacra and Simulation". Adding to this notion of simulation is simulation through mimesis that Oscar Wilde was so perfecctly a subject of. The word mimesis originally refered to the physical act of miming or mimicking something. Plato and his student Aristotle carried this common human behavior over to the realm of artistic production: art imitates the world much as people imitate each other (Potolsky 2)

Potolsky believes that "Mimesis" is a vast concept that involves the imitation of role models built around the imagery of theatre and acting, past and present, original and copy, theatrical work and audience, etc. Imitation therefore makes the original an original, rendering it a model for further imitation. This creates a certain contrast to Baudrillard's simulation theory. Baudrillard portrays imitation as an adversary to any original presence since it blurs the lines between original and copy. Even if by imitating an initial "presence" one would make that presence an original source, by presenting the symptoms as the original, how could one differentiate between the latter and a perfect copy? The tradition of imitation anticipates what literary theorists have called intertextuality , the notion that all cultural products are a tissue of borrowed narratives and images, that everything is absorbed and manipulated, recycled into"new" narratives and images, but nothing is entirely "new." (Potolsky 50). If nothing is entirely new, then the concept of a truly original presence is therefore questionned and perhaps shattered. Wilde's main target was to accumulate wealth and celebrity while on his tour in the Americas; while he put everything on the line to gain those, he allowed himself to be turned into a commodity.

The succes of his tour is therefore very subjective; even if he thought it was a well thought out and delivered campaign, it did monoplize his image and his persona, leaving a permanent mark on him. His image was sold, and so was he.

CHAPTER 2

SOCIAL MEDIA

2.1 Introduction

Today's online interactions through what we call social media (SM), such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, revolve around the sharing of images with corresponding captions. A user uploads a picture or a video, and the audience (other users) reacts to it through views, likes, and shares. This format triggers our quest for popularity; not only that, it also encourages social performativity as we automatically compose our posts depending on our audience's tatse. We create an online persona and curate our profiles to simulate said character. Performativity is more normatized in the age of digital photography and smart phones since it is rooted in human nature. The subject's instinctive quest for fame and popularity is mined and bolstered by capitalism and consumerism in the age of modern technology.

2.2 Performativity and Audience

The sharing of images online via social networking sites (SNS) such as Instagram is prevalent: "At least 20 billion images had been shared via Instagram" (Zappavigna 1). Instagram is a mobile application developed in 2010 for the iPhone. It allows users to take photographs, with the option of applying photographic filters, and to later upload these images with a short caption to its social networking website. The facility of using this app through mobile phones "connotes the remediation of the everyday lives of individuals into

new contexts of social visibility and connection" (Zappavigna 2). How is Instagram a social app? And what is the importance of social visibility? The user takes and uploads images, and the viewer, then, interacts with the latter. The social relation then resides between the "producer, the viewer and the object represented" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 42). In creating this new sort of intimacy where what was once private (family photo albums, personal pictures, thoughts etc.) becomes shared on a social interface among friends and even strangers, depending on your chosen privacy settings, there is a shift in the perception of everyday life. In addition, the normatization of sharing a surplus of intimacy online is encouraged by social visibility that allows users to gain popularity. The attractive facet of getting more "followers" and more "likes" fuels the average user's need to constantly share images. This is not only relevant for Instagram as a specific platform but for all social media. Sharing is participating. As a matter of fact, some theorists mention the birth of an online "participatory culture". Digital media has allowed people to feel as though they are being heard. They have found a way to make their words reach out. Gillespie emphasizes the opportunities that the new media affords the user as consumer, and as producer of content reaching millions of people in a very short amount of time. Content is on the web, and 2.4 billion people use it on a nearly daily basis. Gillespie focuses on the term 'platform' that has emerged recently as an increasingly familiar term in the description of social media. SNSs have become platforms "between user-generated and commercially-produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising, between intervening in the delivery of content and remaining neutral" (4). "Platform" suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, a place from which to

speak and be heard. But despite these egalitarian promises, “platforms” are more like traditional media than they care to admit. This freedom that the user is tricked to feel, and this sense of power that he seemingly has, is illusory. This platform that social media has to offer is not pro bono. It is based on an economical arrangement that benefits the platforms themselves (or their creators at least). In fact, social media’s structure gives the impression that the user has total agency over what he chooses to share or do online, but these preset foundations have been studied to promote certain kinds of interactions and activities. Agency is yet again questioned.

Facebook is by far the most popular of SNSs – “2.01 billion monthly active users as of June 30” (Facebook, 2017). Facebook’s added value resides in its integration with other sites, allowing users to recommend, share or comment on a site’s content, and see their friends’ and others’ activities in relation to those same sites. People can both post information and opinions, and see others’, to an unprecedented extent; and the design of the sites shapes what people do and see. SNSs are generally optimized for short, episodic postings organized chronologically with the most recent first, quickly superseded by more recent ones. Instagram has the same basic format, except the main content is always an image with an assorted optional caption, limited to 2,200 characters (Instagram, 2017). Facebook’s core content has historically consisted of short status updates, a maximum of 420 characters. Members post their activities, opinions, or whatever they want to say to their audiences, which consist mostly of friends and sometimes distant acquaintances or strangers that they have agreed to ‘‘friend.’’ Members also comment on one another’s postings, re-post others’ entries, link to online content, and post photos and videos.

Relationships on Facebook are symmetrical: both parties have to agree for the connection to be made. Facebook suggests possible friends, based on common friends. This “social network” that Facebook promotes is forced in some sorts upon its users. Even if the user can “accept” or “remove” a friend request, the constant “News Feed” previewing your “friends” online activity and shared media, and the encouragment of posting images and statuses through the prompts “What’s on your mind?” and “Create Post”, is in itself directional and guides the subject’s online activity.

What defines a SNS user is his or her ‘‘profile.’’ Each sites has a different template, but they all commonly integrate information about what other members will find relevant. Even though this information is optional, people usually try to use the chance provided to make an impression on other users, and to depict themselves in an attractive manner. The goal is to get through to others while sharing what the user values as important and marketing his identity in an attractive and witty manner.

Being a part of this online community, whether on Facebook, Instagram relates the user’s everyday life into a performance through the posts shared via his profile. An online audience always exists; whether the user has handpicked close friends or chosen a public profile accessable to all viewers interested, the fact that someone can and is viewing his online activity, and that the user is conscious of that external gaze, makes the latter a participant of a semi-constant online performance. This performance is not haphazardous, but is based on a fabricated self that the user is responsible for through his online choices.

2.3 Constructing Identity Through Media

Ever since the beginning of the Internet, how the self has been constructed and understood in cyberspace has been an area of concern. Are we different people online from the people we are offline, or does the Internet provide us with new opportunities to gain greater insights about ourselves? To be able to answer these questions, one has to come back to the notion of "self" as there have been many theories put forth to explain the concept of selfhood. Psychologists often use the terms "self" and "identity" interchangeably, although many would argue that these are separate concepts. The 'looking--glass self' was a concept developed by Cooley (1902) to describe the concept that a person's self grows out of society's interpersonal interactions and the perceptions of others. For Cooley, there is no self without society. Many scholars have believed, even in the early days of the Internet, that cyberspace affords unique opportunities for expressing the self. In the 1990s, the Internet looked very different from how it looks today. It was slower, more text-based, and had fewer people inhabiting its space. In some ways, it was easier than it is today to hide and pretend to be someone or something else on the Internet. Sherry Turkle (1995) was one of the first theorists to consider this idea of disembodiment and selves in cyberspace. She is famous for naming the computer a "second self" and argued that the Internet provided people with the opportunity to "re-invent" themselves (287). Zeynep Tufekci has argued that many of the activities that take place on SNSs can be understood by applying Goffman's theory of the self. She wrote: "users engage in impression management by adjusting their profiles, linking to their friends, displaying their likes and dislikes, joining groups, and otherwise adjusting the situated appearance of their

profiles" (547). Others have made a similar argument, stating that Facebook is a multi-audience identity production site. In sum, social media is a platform through which one can create an online identity for an online audience.; The question is, how does one create an online identity? And how much control and agency does the user have in portraying the latter?

Periodic postings are one way to create a solid identity, keeping in mind that what kind of topics a user posts about, his opinions on certain topics, and even the ways in which one expresses himself all influence the online persona. But Facebook, going back to its initial format and goals, relies on the pictures of its users. Initially created as a "Face" book, a directory for college students, its users still post their portraits even though photographs have become optional. Three billion photos are uploaded to Facebook each month (Van House 2). Facebook, in its evolution, has even increased the quality of image presentation and its emphasis on photos with its December 2010 profile changes: "Give a more complete picture of how you spend your time, including your projects at work, the classes you take and other activities you enjoy (like hiking or reading). You can even include the friends who share your experiences (…)" (Facebook, 2010). Why is there an emphasis on pictures?

According to Van House, "Images can tell the viewer not only what the member looks like but where the member has been, what they've been doing, what they consider photo-worthy, and what their friends say about their images; and may show their friends, their pets, their cars and other possessions, living space, work space – a wide range of topics" (4). Photography then becomes a tool to report these seemingly authentic

depictions of the users, their environments, their friends and hobbies. In addition, the conversations based on these images, engaging them through the comments with "friends", create an opening for getting to know them better through these interactions. Van house also refers to Barthes' own input on the literature of photography as ' ' the advent of myself as other. . .Photography transformed the subject into object' ' (Barthes 12–13). Van House punctuates the performativity imbued in a photograph by reminding us that, in front of the lens, the subject/object is at one and the same time the person he thinks he is, the one he wants others to think he his, the one the photographer thinks he is, and the one the photographer makes use of to exhibit his or her art (2). She bases herself on the fact that her interviewees often spoke of images as ' 'more real' ' than text in order to ground her argument that SNSs give us an explicit access to what others are saying about us and the photos they make of us (2). Sharing pictures becomes even more interesting online because we get a "reaction" from an audience, comments, likes, or even re-sharing. We get an online feedback answering to our created identity/performance. But since the visibility and persistence of activity on SNSs makes the actions and practices of other people apparent, it is only natural that this visibility supports social comparison and makes practices, norms, and departures from them highly visible (Van House 4). In conclusion, social media platforms do give the user a certain liberty to "perform" and automatically provide him with an "audience", but at the same time, they turn him into a subject, categorized and always compared to other users. Society then digresses from its *in real life* "punishment and discipline" in the Foucadian sense, to switch its reaction to an online normatization. Online platforms are known for creating an environment where the user feels more

freedom than he does in real life, because he is sitting behind a screen, safe at home. He is made to feel the need to overshare and express himself; encouraged by the possibility of popularity and yearning for interactions with other users, one would feel at liberty to share anything he wishes to. Simultaneously, the user is always being judged for the content he depicts. Once posted online, it is very hard to control what is done with the content. Even if the user decides to delete a post at some point, it does not mean that other users do not have it already saved- that is without mentioning the rights that the SNSs themselves hold over any online content. Jones also backs this up by arguing that "while technologies of visual representation enable us to confirm the self, this also entails an objectification of the self so as to prove its existence as a subject" (xvii). However, she proposes that the subject's reliance on photography comes from the body being "never enough". Technological and visual imaging of the body then become a tendency to "exceed oppositional models of signification" (Jones 18). By being so caught up in creating a self/image, one would become so immersed in the latter that it would infringe on the bodily self. This directly brings us back to Baudrillard's *simulacrum.* Giving the image the role and importance of the "real", thus blurring the lines of authenticity by relying on simulation, is contingent to paradoxically giving ground to the body as a "signifying, corporeal unity in representation—to affirm the self" (Jones 21). The body in one's image is the same as the map being mistaken for the actual territory. The postmodern subjects, aware of the fact that everything, including their body, is collapsible into a commodifying image in late capitalism, can no longer unidirectionally refer to the body as a reifying guarantor for a concept of the self (Jones 21). The 'real' or 'live' body put on display

online social media platforms, therefore, does not secure a stable, coherent or recognizable self. This illusion of cohesion of performance, through media, photographs, captions, and statuses is not in any way an authentic depiction of the self. Instead, it simulates an identity, a persona, a consumable illusion as maintenance of an online performance for the entertainment of others.

This performativity, I argue, does not simply turn the SNS user into an online commodity, but alters his self-image and, therefore, goals and future, which, according to Rubin and Berntsen's "Understanding autobiographical memory", are connected (106). As they explain it, by choosing the memories/photographs kept, one would construct narratives that shape the way one would perceive himself, and accordingly, his goals are altered (129). One would naturally choose to keep the memories that give him pride and that compliment his character. A photograph, as previously mentioned, freezes a moment in time and becomes a "memento mori" (Sontag), a reminder of death, by testifying to time's relentless melt. Adding this to Scruton's argument that a photograph becomes proof of an object existing, what is seemingly portrayed in a photograph is easily substituted for the truth. The moment frozen in time is therefore archived and has the upper hand on any other that has not been recorded. Social media, though, has altered the nature of this archive from the personal and shared only with few, if any (for example a photo album shared with family members and close friends), to entire photo albums and pictures shared online through social media profiles. The user participates in creating his own personal online historical archive. Keeping what he deems worthy of sharing, this online archive creates "collective memories" (Berntsen 142). Memories stop being personal and they lose

their exclusivity when shared. Since memories shape the self, an online persona becomes a "collective identity". By creating a collective memory online, the user shares the sequential identity created through the visual images curated. The more people view this online archive, the more credible this narrative of identity becomes. As more people buy into the persona the user portrays, he, as well, becomes more prone to fall into his own simulation and take up or fully adapt the character and narrative simulated. This collective identity thus contributes to commodifying the user's "self" as he keeps producing content, becoming an online page, that others scroll through for entertainment. When self-perception is altered, it has a major impact on real lives. Having the audience in mind, the user's selection of images ensues a fabrication of ideals, creating a collage of the self and feeding on the images and the narrative/identity that the user sets for his self to follow and become. The user becomes simulacrum.

To better explain how social media's structure influences our performativity, I will quote Van House per verbum:

> "(…) the structure and policies of social networking sites, along with user practices and norms, support and even encourage certain kinds of self-representation, relationships, and even subjects or selves, while discouraging or making difficult others. The implication is that certain kinds of information are of interest to one's contacts, certain categories are ''normal,'' and certain activities are acceptable. The ways that people and their activities **are categorized** are neither natural nor neutral. (…)**These constructed self-representations** are part of a complex interplay among the offline self, with its complexity, contingency, and dynamicism; one's (often

multiple) **online representation(s); the subject's aspirations; his or her assumptions about others' expectations; social comparisons; actual and desired group membership and social connections**; gender roles and other normative influences; historical and cultural situatedness; and feedback from viewers; as well as (our primary interest here) the intended and emergent design and practices of a site. This description is a simplification; the point is to highlight the recursiveness of a complex sociotechnical network. My argument here is twofold. First, on SNSs, agency is complex and contestable. Second, participants are not simply representing but constructing themselves" (5).

So, other than the implicit categorization that the user is immediately subdued to through the SNSs formats, the latter induces a *construction* of an online self. This construction of identity echoes Austin's, Buler's, and Evreinov's concept. Whether it is through performative locutions, the formation of a gendered self, or the theatrum mundi, agency is always as "complex and contestable". In fact, all these theorists talk about a complex and ever-evolving construction of the "self" through the presence and "reaction" of an audience. There can be no self without the "other". Online interactions become mapped out versions of these performative social interactions as they materialize these interactions and save them online where they become easily traceable.

Baym, in her book Personal connections in the digital age, provides three major frameworks for examining the interactions between people and technologies. One of them is technological determinism, a mindset that for better or for worse, humans have limited agency with regard to new technologies, "machines change us" (27). Social construction of

technology viewpoint argues that technologies are invented by humans who are embedded in social contexts, therefore, individuals, communities and policymakers collectively determine the rules that govern people's uses of, and behaviors regarding, new technologies. In sum, there is a constant interplay between human and technological forces. Technologies undoubtedly help shape human behaviors and institutions, but technologies exist to serve the user, and users individually and collectively decide how that happens. How does this new technology shape us, though? For instance, digital technologies allow us to suspend ourselves in a liminal space – Baym calls it "boundary flux" (5) – that blurs accepted notions of identity, privacy, honesty, freedom, community, gender and ethnicity, power structures, and social norms, in addition to the now taken-for-granted blurring of basic temporal and spatial boundaries. Baym then turns to the innate human tendencies of insecurity and narcissism in the digital era. Presenting data from blogs and interviews, she points out how people feel the need to look "Facebook-worthy" on any given occasion, or the tendency to attend events where one could potentially get nice profile photographs. The author looks at such behaviour types as reactionary, stemming from the usage, and pressure to post unrealistically attractive images on social networking sites to generate maximum likes and comments. The experiences and studies Baym suggests lead the reader to analyze, at depth, the relationship between heavy makeup and body contouring attire in real life, and Photoshop and Instagram-like effects on profile pictures. On several levels, it is easier to manipulate and construct virtual identities - possibly allowing for individuals to be more satisfied with their creations of ideal selves. Baym contends that this could be seen as one of the reasons for the exponential growth of

social networking. Overall, Baym's view appears to be one of acceptance. She states in the epilogue, "digital media aren't saving us or ruining us. Digital media aren't reinventing us. But they are changing the ways in which we relate to others and ourselves in countless, pervasive ways" (152).

Just like in Oscar Wilde’s case, the notion of self comes up yet again. Is there a real “original” self that is maipulated online? Or is it the same nuance of “private” and “public” selves that evolves with the online audience? In addition, the constant posting of pictures, and the performativity behind them makes us dubious when it comes to the presence of an “original”. If all subjects are to become copies, mimicking another copy found online and considered to be a “model” of what the subject should look and act like, then isn’t the “self” lost? Lacan explains that the ego is based on a memetic moment of origin, when the child identifies with an image of itself. It is precisely when the child gazes at his reflexion in the mirror (between the age of six and eighteen months because they start being able to recognize themselves in the mirror), that an identification process takes place. The subject assumes an image, “imago. This mirror image, whilst the child is failing to control his body, is presented as coherent, fixed and autonomous, and the child a preview of who to become. It comes before the “I” that recognizes it, and therefore reverses the usual relationship between copy and original (Lacan 2). Mimicking an image online, and modeling ourselves according to a pre-existent notion or a photograph, is somethig that is innate to the subject. The self is formed through this identification to an “other” or an “other’s image”. Online simulation suggests that the Lacanian mirror stage is “never surmounted because the self originated from an image it return to the image as an ‘abiding

symbol of its autonomy', an ironically mimetic means of asserting our independence from mimesis" (Lacan 1).

2.4 Essena O'Neill Social Media Influencer

The agency a user has throughout this formation of the "self" is dubious. Whether the user bases himself on a pre-existent online image, pre-set norms, or fashionable ways of being, the online performative process blurs the lines between active posing and societal demands over maintaining an identity created, and constantly advertising commodities and lifestyles. A good study case would be the example of Essena O'Neill, an Australian Instagram user turned social media influencer. O'Neill started posting "perfect" images online ever since she was fifteen years old. What makes her a special case though was the way she decided to "change the game" in October 2015 (Hunt 1). O'Neill had more than half a million followers until she "became fed up with the manipulation, mundanity and insecurity behind social media posting", and decided to denounce the SM platform (Instagram), as it promotes a "contrived perfection made to get attention" (Hunt 1). Moreover, she blatantly stated that she easily made 2000 AUD from one single post when promoting a dress or a brand. She deleted more than 2000 of her pictures, then re-edited her captions to reveal the performativity behind them and how they were nothing close to being "real". Her new captions explain the tedious process behind each of her poses, explaining that everything in the posted images was contrived (see figures 8 to 13). The setting was studied, the body posed to seem flawless, and most of all, the clothes and products were only featured in the online pictures because she was being handsomely paid

to promote them. Her days revolved around getting the perfect shot, dressing up in clothes, going to the beach, in order to promote a swimming suit or a dress because she was paid to do so, and this created a constant search for others' approval online. Even though she had initially taken on this role of her own will, to perform as a perfect model for these brands online, and to showcase her "perfect body" and "perfect life", one has to think about the motives a teenager could have.

Figure 8 – One of the pictures from Essena O'Neill's Instagram Account, with a re-edited caption, promoting www.letsbegamechangers.com, her own website.

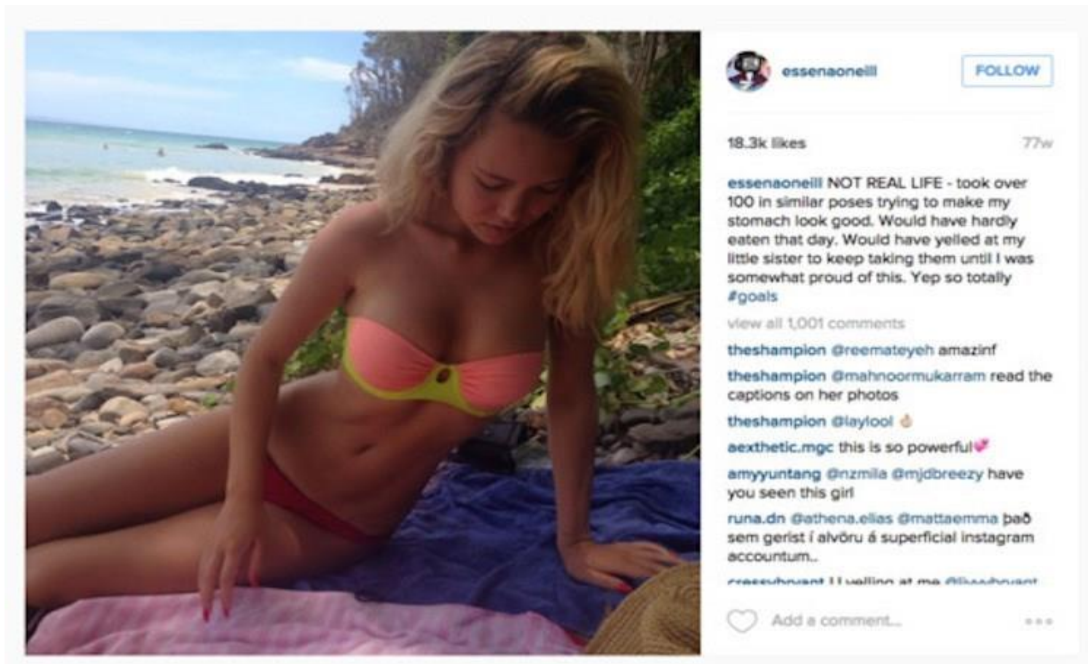

Figure 9- One of the pictures from Essena O’Neill’s Instagram Account, with a re-edited caption: “NOT REAL LIFE”.

Fig 10- One of the pictures from Essena O’Neill’s Instagram Account, with a re-edited caption denouncing it as a calculated selfie to promote a tanning product.

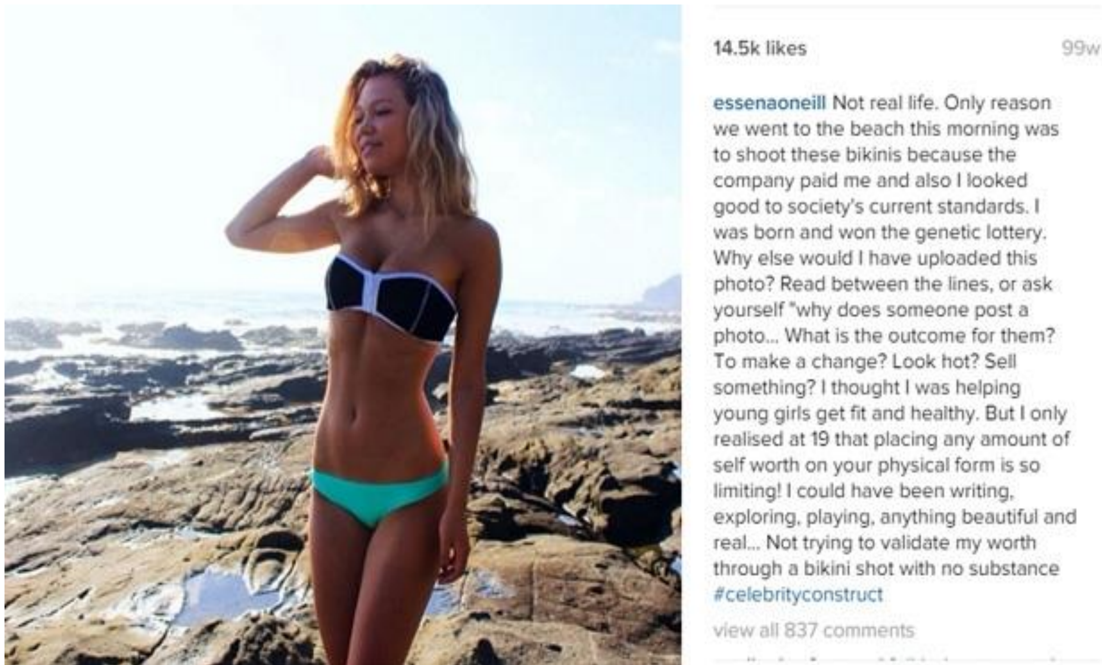

Figure 11- One of the pictures from Essena O'Neill's Instagram Account with a re-edited caption describing the performativity behind the pictures online. "The only reason we went to the beach this morning was to shoot these bikinis because the company paid me (…)"

O'Neill stated that she only wanted to gain other's approval and improve her popularity and sought to do so by portraying the image others wanted to see. Posting pictures online got her contracts for advertising campaigns, and brands paid her to promote their merchandise. The more she played along, the more followers she got, she explains, and the more she became addicted to the likes, the more performative she became.

The awareness of the presence of an online audience will definitely fuel this popularity contest, even though, as Goffman argues, performativity and the presentation of the self is always performative and calculated. When does one become fully aware of the consequences of online performativity? And how would that person gain agency by not completely stepping away from these platforms and not participating in its performative rituals? Then again, agency is questionable in real life, since it is fueled by the other—since the "self" and its presentation is altered depending on our audience, motives and goals. Aren't we, as subjects, permanently going back and forth between controlling and being controlled, being subjects and objects at other times, and subjectifying/objectifying others in turn?

Now, after taking a step back and deciding to "quit" social media and delete her accounts, O'Neill decided to create her own website, (www.letsbegamechangers.com), as an inspirational platform for viewers to "talk about real problems, emotions and experiences, beyond material pursuits" (Lydford 1). The website functions as a social platform, minus the ability to "like" or "count the views" of the content anyone posts on the forum. Some people question this move, and say that this, in itself, is a self-promoting strategy (Scott 1). By stepping away from the common self-campaign tactics of every social media, she created a buzz around her name- she attracted even more followers and even more media attention as people celebrated her courage in embracing her flaws and stepping away from the perfect performativity online. For some, "This is simply smart marketing. She's reversing her conventional image and in the process, gaining even more media exposure. She's clever -- this will only improve her career in a shift towards 'body

positive' advocacy which is more of a niche"; "She is finding ways to milk a second set of attention from her already-posted photos by rebranding herself as somehow reformed and body-positive" (Scott 2). Other people are defending her and calling others cynical to doubt the authenticity of Ms. O'Neill,who has changed her @essenaoneill Instagram account name to Social Media Is Not Real Life. Whether her intentions are for self-promotion or not, one has to question the loss of agency, or at least the blurriness of the fine line between actively posting and being *fully* aware of the consequences, and being semi-conscious yet blinded by the thirst for popularity, approval and even material success. "I have created an image of myself that I think others feel is unattainable, others look at as a role model, others look at as some type of 'perfect human'," she announced in a YouTube video. In her videos, she tries to encourage her followers to step away from social media platforms and stop using them at least for a couple of weeks, or at least to think of the motives behind every picture, question it, and know that "It's not real". In one video, she called tech-savvy individuals to create a new platform without the likes or the comments that allow for the judging and shaming of the user or subject in the image posted.

Having introduced this modern example, the next chapter discusses the power of the image and its key role in integrating the subject into an online game of simulation, especially when comparing it to Oscar Wilde's case study. I will trace the differences and similarities between simulation in the 1900's and modern simulation online, answering questions over agency via performativity and media use.

CHAPTER 3

OSCAR WILDE A PREDECESSOR OF S.M PERFORMTIVITY AND SIMULATION

How is online performativity similar to the way Oscar Wilde presented himself to 19th century America? Since SNS users vary their language, tone, and edit behavior depending on audience, Van House's description of SNSs as supporting ''reification of self through public performance'' (450) becomes a newer formulation of the same pre-existing concept. The SNS becomes a haven to publicly yet safely perform aspects of oneself that one might not showcase otherwise (Van House 4). Both performances, whether online or in real life as in Oscar Wilde's case, aim to promote desirable social impressions and incarnate an idea of who one wants to be, "showcasing aspects of personal identity that users want to cultivate'' (4). Another online performance category would be that of gender identity. Butler's argument is that "There is no subject who decides on its gender (...) gender is part of what decides the subject (...) gender is constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints that not only produce but regulate various bodily beings (...) gender is the effect of productive constraints" (Butler 2). Therefore, gender is still regulated through online norms (the gender category that one fills on one's profile is alone an over-simplified reminder that there is a sort of gender awareness). In some cases, people are denied integration into social groups because of their gender affiliations. Just like Oscar Wilde's sexual endeavors imprinted on his persona, the same

cause and effect still today, even in a more “allowing” society where being gay is not punishable by imprisonment (in some countries that is).

Wilde, fighting to make a name for himself in a pre-computer/social media era, had to turn himself into a real-life spectacle. Albeit his approach was a bit distinct from modern ones because of the recent media platforms, he did demonstrate the same modern social media “simulation” symptoms. The blatent difference would be his physical presence. In order to reach a certain audience, Wilde had to travel and make a real life appearance. Modern technology has made the “boundary flux”, as Baym calls it, possible. Video, images, and constant online connection bend the limits of presence. But performativity, the use of photography to simulate a certain authenticity, and a verbose interaction that reinforces the bricolaged public persona, are still put to use, now more than ever. Unlike performance, performativity is not the intentional act of the aware, thinking, planning subject. ‘‘Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names’’ (Butler 2). Since Oscar Wilde knew that his every word and action would be reported and was viewed by an audience, performativity was defintely at play since he was conscious of the resulting decisions. The same performativity is pertinent when it comes to online posts strategized by the user on SNSs. Even routine activity becomes performative and posed when shared, articulating a certain message or trying to create a certain level of relatability that would then affect the user’s online popuarity. Wilde obviously used Sarony’s photographs where his posing and costume were also calculated to spread out certain features of his promoted “self”. That does not seem strange at all when compared to

the popularity of photographs shared online, and the popular culture of being "Face-book worthy" (Baym). Last but not least, Wilde's witty retorts, which were often reported and made headlines, can easily be ancestors of the modern witty tweets, captions or statuses. "The short, episodic, and transient nature of postings, the pithy, quotable epigram gets wider attention than a lengthy, thoughtful reflection" (Van House 5). Just as the posting and reposting of content demonstrates one's media habits, interests, opinions, taste, and sense of humor, one's remarks during interviews, or how he presents himself in social gatherings and events, put together with his stated opinions, especially for people like our playwright/author, demonstrate a lot. Therefore, the subject becomes easily categorized by the attending populace which forms an opinion on the latter and shares it. Today's viewers' feedback, as Van House mentions, provide ''social verification'' or ''social legitimacy" (5). For Oscar Wilde, this "social verification' was achieved through real life interaction with the public, resulting fandom and mimicking, or caricatures, and feedback provided by newspaper articles.

Hardin and Higgins, whose theory in developmental psychology research Van House cites, stand behind the notion that ''the more one shares certain features of the self with others, the more these features become a foundation of reality in the experience of the self and the more they become resistant to change'' (Van House 7). This theory is applicable to both Oscar Wilde's case and every modern SNS user. By fabricating these online personas, we highlight certain facets of our characters that might or might not exist in the first place, through performative behavior and media, only to adopt these simulations in real life, and in turn, become simulacra by pretending to be authentic. Simulacra drives

us away from “real experiences” as O’Neill warned her followers. The images propogated online are fabricated and posed, yet mistaken for “real” situations. These simulations often become models for other users, just like O’Neill became an idol for other online users, who in turn, probably posed in the same ways she did to simulate being closer to their goal, the latter being: becoming like Enessa O’Neill and adopting her promoted lifestyle. This simulation of an image verges towards mimesis as it mimics an already portrayed role. X want to play the role Y is portraying in his photograph, and Y is modeled according to his idol Z. The roles of actors and audience become interchangeable in this online theatrical mimesis; users are producers of content as well as consumers. Simulation and mimesis become constant performances online. There is no original identity as the users bend their “selves” according to the ever-changing audience-users. Agency alternates between actor and viewer, blurring the lines of who is subject and who is object, who is the actor and who exactly is the audience throughout this “boundary-flux”. Just as Oscar Wilde’s case proves that there is no full agency over identity and performativity, O’Neill’s case proves that one can only have the illusion of controlling one’s image.

Wilde became the daydreaming, high-knee-stocking-wearing aesthete that he and everyone else portrayed him to be, with his langueur and his love for flowers and lilies, and beautiful things. Social media users obviously feel the need to live up to their profiles and become the person depicted whether by becoming linked to the clothes they wear, the image portrayed, their online character or the groups and opinions they are affiliated with online. Wilde used the exact same strategy that today’s social media celebrities apply to market themselves by creating an over-the-top persona, flamboyant through costume and

oral articulation and performativity, and trying to market it and make it as public as he could to grab the audience's attention and become a famous "aesthete".

What worked for him at that day and age, to a certain point, also works for today's "social media influencers". In fact, these "influencers" are very recent to the market. A social media influencer is "someone who has above-average potential to influence or persuade. This person usually has a sizeable social network with whom he communicates frequently" (Newstex Global Business Blogs). Social media influencers are used as modern marketing strategies. Newstex Global stated that it is the same "Word of Mouth Marketing" concept reapplied through social media. Word of mouth advertising was considered the best form of advertising long before the advent of internet, and recent reports have shown that buyers listen to the people that influence them, mostly their friends or poular influencers like celebrities or VIPs in ther online social circle. The market has taken notice of that, and consequently has developped strategies to use SNSs and users to maximise their sales and profits (Newstex Global Business Blogs 1).

Today's generation, with the nomenclature of "Generation Z", is always connected online. Through social media the modern subject is permanently consuming (and producing) content. Taylor Hulyk explains that several brands have already tapped into the tremendous potential of influencer marketing, partnering with influencers who maintain presences on social networks built for short format visual and interactive content (3). How does social media contribute to advertising and marketing? Ideally, a brand must be seen to possess strong, favorable, unique and relevant mental associations. That's why firms use a sort of branding to imbue the product with a personality, and to give a product, service a

human-like quality to make it more relatable (4). Since media relies on advertising revenue for commercial viability, and advertisers have traditionally relied on media to address the audience/potential consumers, social media fits naturally into the equation. Except, instead of regular advertisements, video ads etc., a celebrity or a human brand is introduced into the picture. The brand's goal is to possibly influence the human brand's audience and convert them into buyers. Celebrities can use their own social media: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to influence this audience (e.g. the Kardashians). On the long run, with consistent posts, the human brand can merge with the product brand, hence images of said person or celebrity will directly be connected to the product, service or firm and its image. But this "human brand" can also be an ordinary user, if the latter can "assert a strong identity that can underpin and animate high public profiles" (Khamis et al. 6). I am not mentioning self-branding as a ubiquitous social media practice that all users engage in, but as a form of popular modern marketing that puts to use the advantages of social media in reaching an enormous online audience and favoring the consumption of promoted commodities through photographs. Self-branding becomes a tool for easily attainable fame. Both celebrities and the common user turned famous usually have at least two things in common: "they could attract attention easily; and, depending on the basis of their fame, embody a narrative of sorts" (Khamis et al. 6). Self-branding has been practiced since the creation of social media in the early 2000's since platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram allowed the establishment of a strong online identity. A strong online identity attracts a big audience through a compelling narrative or something else that makes it "stand out in the attention economy" as Khamis et al. affirm (7). O'Neill

stood out, in her own words, because she had “won the genetic lottery” (see fig 11) having a naturally long torso and a tiny waist. Being young and physically attractive were enough to earn her attention online so she did not have to rely on a compelling narrative.

Page focuses on how this emphasizes a “construction of identity as a product to be consumed by others, and on interaction which treats the audience as an aggregated fan base to be developed and maintained in order to achieve social or economic benefit” (182). This sounds all too familiar. Social media is indeed driven by a specific kind of identity construction “self-mediation” as it’s been called, because what users post is a curated “museum of the self” that contributes to the audience perceiving them as they hope to be perceived. But self-mediation was clearly possible before the Internet era. Good reinforces this argument in his article when he relates diaries to blogs, photo albums as predecessors of Instagram, hardcopy scrapbooks and Facebook (Good 569). Of course, this convergence of technology, providing a platform for global, interactive and commercial communication, on a scale and at a speed not precedingly possible, has redefined “postmodern notions of identity” (Berger 235). Since what used to be for private use and personal reflection became meant for sharing online, this directly imbued these practices with notions of “construction, style and fluidity”. While trying to be seen as unique in an online world where popularity and gaining a bigger audience becomes a competition, the pursuit of this recognition entails practices of what Theresa M. Senft calls ‘microcelebrity’: the concerted and strategic cultivation of an audience through social media with a view to attaining celebrity status (9).

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

As many have argued before me, I claim that the cycle of representation that is marketed by SNSs formats has always existed, as it is rooted in human behavior, only facilitated and accentuated by technology. The proof lies in the fact that Oscar Wilde was a 19th century version of the "micro-celebrity", a predecessor, if you might, of modern social media performativity. Van House stands behind the same notion that SNSs are examples of what Suchman means when she says ''we might understand 'technologies' as materializations of more and less contested sociotechnical configurations'' (9). In fact, she uses Suchman's argument that, in technology design, the line between human and machine is constructed, not natural or inevitable; that what may appear to be a singular interface is instead a multiplicity of encounters and interactions, not identical to one another; and that both design and interaction take place within a set of practices embedded in the social and material world. (Suchman 1, 6).

As the technology and the platforms develop, human nature's concealed or subtle tendencies will be more blown up and therefore become easily discernable, especially at an age where over-sharing is encouraged (always creating online content and sharing in order to be active online). On a larger scale, where one feels the freedom to share and post online, contributing to his profile or, to put it differently, his online record, his performativity, or what the user tries to be perceived as, is clearly seen and analyzed by other users (and is saved or at least leaves online traces). What was once done in private

through scrapbooks, personal photo albums and diaries, is now shared online, contributing to the "open book" perception of online users. The person they want to be, their goals, dreams and ambitions, dislikes and likes, and even social relations, are all monitored. The online world becomes a diary, an endless photo album, a historical record of events and conversations, accessible to a wide audience. It becomes the human mind externalized and consumed.

In addition, agency over the creation of identity becomes illusory online. The user having the tools to bricolage an online persona mistakes his performativity for power in creating a shared "self" online. This performativity has been prevalent for as long as society has existed. The "self" has always been built around the "other" whether through mimesis or simulation. There is no "new" or "orignial content", the subject recycles what already exists in order to form an identity via performativity. What could be added though, is that the modern subject is overly-commodified online by becoming a living, breathing, marketing tool. Baudrillard blames contemporary consumer culture, "In consumer society, natural needs or desires have been buried under by desires simulated by cultural discourse (advertisements, media…) which tell us what we want" (1554). These "hyperreal" needs are generated to provide work and profit and spit us into a capitalistic society motivated by money. It is true that through social media, symbolic capital (online popularity) is turned into real capital (money) since brands seek out online users to advertise their products and therefore sponsor them and their content. But this consumer culture existed even before the advancements of technology that we are so familiar with today.

Oscar Wilde, hence, after my presentation of his persona and endeavors, was a predecessor of the modern social media influencer. He was a trend-setter, someone who knew how to sell himself and create a brand-image, someone who promoted himself throughout the years, creating the content as he went along with his journey, whether throughout his conference days, or his later works: his plays and novels. His “aesthetic” persona definitely added to his uniqueness and value, and his narrative allowed him to stick out in the “attention economy” as an individual. His “pursuit of recognition” raised him in social circles, and made him a trendy topic in society. His strategic cultivation of an audience through media with a view to attaining celebrity status relied partly on mouth-to-ear marketing. He became a prominent figure in consumer related products, even though he might not have gotten a slice of the pie from the merchandise sold via his “aesthetic” image. Oscar Wilde was therefore a pioneer as a simulacrum in a capitalistic economy that encourages people to turn themselves into a consumable brand-image/narrative through media. One could blame the most popular motive: the materialistic gratification that impels us mortals to heighten our performativity and seek out an audience; or, one could wonder if it’s the only direct cause that leads us to do so, and not in fact human nature, that wires us to perform and seek out a listener/viewer, relying on the fact that we are at the utmost “social creatures” that innately seek out valorization and acceptance.

CHAPTER 5

MIMESIS

Having a B.A in filmmaking, I chose to complement this written thesis with a short movie to add a visual aspect to its literary aspect. This film feeds on the concepts already mentioned: performativity, simulation, and consumerism. Since these notions are a little abstract and hard to convey visually, I added a visual catalyst: mimesis.

Mimesis (/maɪˈmiːsəs/; Ancient Greek: μίμησις (*mīmēsis*), from μιμεῖσθαι (*mīmeisthai*), "to imitate," is a critical and philosophical term that carries a wide range of meanings, which include imitation, representation, mimicry, *imitatio*, receptivity, nonsensuous similarity, the act of resembling, the act of expression, and the presentation of the self.

How does mimesis fit into this? Whether in Oscar Wilde's case, or in the modern social media context, performativity is simulated. A simulacrum is being valorised and idealized, and an authentic presence is being molded by it, instead of it being the other way around. In my script, I wanted to highlight the dangers of this cycle. Through mimesis, imitation of an image, or of a portrayed identity the original bends itself to fit a pre-existent mold. I wanted this to be an ode to Baudrillard's "map preceding the territory".

Synopsis:

A young woman (X) contemplates images in frames, one image in specific capts her attention. She taps on it (the equivalent of liking a picture on social media) and therefore willingly takes part of a mimesis game. Three women wearing black masks and

dresses, representing consumerism and performativity, help her imitate the poses that the image (Y) takes. How do they represent consumerism? They provide X with the exact clothes Y is wearing, as well as the commodities needed to form an exact replica of the picture portrayed (chair, book, purse…).

These black figures represent performativity. The black dresses they are wearing help merge them with the background in order to relate the notion that they are in fact puppeteers, not to be seen, telling X how to act, actively posing her body to fit an image, manipulatig her body when needed. In the end, X loses agency, the mimesis game has gone too far, and the puppeteers and the image gain full control, turning X into an image, completely commodified, just like many others.

APPENDIX

Chronology

1839 Invention of photography

1854 Oscar Wilde born on the 16 Oct in Dublin

1864->1871 Oscar Wilde student at Portoya Royal school in Enniskillen

1871-74 Oscar Wilde student at Trinity College Dublin

1874-79 Scholarship at Magdalen College in Oxford

1880 Publication of Vera or the Nihilists

1881 Publication of the first collection of his poems- Gilbert and Sullivan's Patience

1882 Lecture tour in the U.S- Napoleon Sarony photographs

1884 Oscar Wilde's marriage to Constance Lloyd

1885 Birth of Oscar Wilde's first son Cyril

1886 Birth of 2nd son Vivienne

1887 Publication of "The Canterville ghost" and Lord Arthur Seville's crimes"

1887-1889 Oscar Wilde editor of "Women's World"

1888 Publication of "The Decay of Lying" critical essays etc.

1890 Publication of *The picture of Dorian Gray*

1891 Oscar Wilde meets Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas known as Bosie son of the 8th Marquees of Queensbury and publishes "Salome"

1895 Brings libel suit against the Marquees of Queensbury, Queensbury acquitted- Wilde arrested. After 2 trials, found guilty of "indecent acts" and sentenced to 2 years of hard labor. Imprisoned in Pentonville; later transferred to Wandsworth and Reading Prisons

1897 Writes De Profundis while in prison (published in full in 1962); Released from prison- goes to France

1900 Dies in Paris at the age of 46

1991 Invention of the World Wide Web

2000 Invention of the first camera phone

2004 Invention of Facebook

2006 Invention of Twitter

2009 Facebook most used SNS

2010 Invention of Instagram

2013 Invention of Snapchat

Fig 1- A timeline that will help situate the events mentioned in the thesis.

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