Wilde Exposed: Victorian Literary Celebrity and the Graphic Revolution

Gerardo Salvati

Abstract
Celebrity Studies scholarship has, over the last three decades, taken a turn toward the literary in general and Victorian authors in particular. Most scholars point to the Graphic Revolution of the nineteenth century as celebrity's starting moment, proposing that the industrialisation of print, rise of the pictorial press, and advancements in photographic technologies inaugurated a new mode of celebration – one based less on personal achievement and more on a perceived desire for proximity to the public individual. From this perspective, Oscar Wilde represents an interesting case study. Indeed, Wilde's celebrity is a significant phenomenon in the sense that it was never actually the product of his literary work. In his case, the public persona was the precursor of his literary fame, not vice versa. By the time of his American lecture tour, Wilde's image was already eye-catching enough for the public to notice it and wish to interpret it. The scholarly focus on Wilde as *self-inventor*, *self-creator*, and *self-fashioner* overestimates the degree to which Wilde was seen as the sole creator of his celebrity image during his American lecture tour and the degree to which audiences were impressed by what they saw. While Wilde's visibility was crucial to the formation of his celebrity on an international scale, the image for which he became known was not entirely *his*. Caricatures of the Aesthete in the British press and on stage shaped American audiences' expectations for Wilde's image, and, in so doing, moulded his celebrity for decades to come.

Key-words: Oscar Wilde, Graphic Revolution, celebrity, American lecture tour, self-inventor.

1. Introduction

In his seminal study, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1962), historian Daniel Boorstin described his idea of celebrity thus:

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> The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness [...] He is neither good nor bad, great nor petty. He is the human pseudo-event. He has been fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness [...] He is made by all of us who willingly read about him, who like to see him on television, who buy recordings of his voice, and talk about him to our friends. His relation to morality and even to reality is highly ambiguous. (Boorstin 1962: 57ff)

For Boorstin, the celebrities of mid-twentieth century America – singers, actors, athletes, designers, film stars – were the epitome of what he defined as the 'Graphic Revolution' of the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, from the mid-1830s onward, the mass reproduction and circulation of the printed image drastically changed the way in which human beings saw themselves and the world around them. At the same time, Boorstin's critique suggests the terms of debate in Celebrity Studies, because maintaining that celebrities are "known for well-knownness" is like stating that they are created on purpose and that they are hollow, potentially manipulative distractions undeserving of renown, as opposed to famous heroes. Boorstin asserts that celebrity is transient, aligned with contemporaneity, while fame and heroism are enduring and "connected with history" (Marshall 1997: 4ff); and that "the more celebrity one has, the less likely he/she is to be truly great" (Gabler 1998: 2).

Though Boorstin's position has been rightfully put under scrutiny, his idea of celebrity has produced lines of inquiry with which scholars and thinkers continue to contend: how is celebrity constructed, circulated and consumed, and by whom? To what degree do celebrities construct, reflect and challenge the values of a particular public? And what are the effects of celebrity? The present paper will underline several aspects of the technological changes crucial to the Graphic Revolution as it relates to celebrity culture and in connection with Oscar Wilde's persona. Specifically, I shall examine the degree to which celebrity is employed in the contexts of visibility, trying to give an answer to a core issue: if celebrity deals more with images than words, written or spoken, then how can we make sense of what happens when an author like Wilde, a figure of the word, also becomes a celebrity, a figure of the image?

Before the mid-1830s, British readers had comparably limited visual access to representations of well-known writers (Anderson

1991; Braudy 1997). Over the following seventy years, however, Britons witnessed the Graphic Revolution in Boorstin's sense, the "great technological revolution that preserved, transmitted, and disseminated precise images" (Boorstin 1962: 14). For Boorstin, this increased capacity to reproduce images confused rather than clarified the world:

> While that Revolution has multiplied and vivified our images of the world, it has by no means generally sharpened or clarified the visible outlines of the world which fill our experience. Quite the contrary. By a diabolical irony the very facsimiles of the world which we make on purpose to bring it within our grasp, to make it less elusive, have transported us into a new world of blurs. By sharpening our images we have blurred all our experience. The new images have blurred traditional distinctions. (p. 213)

Thanks to the invention of Thomas Bewick's process of wood engraving in the early-1830s, many authors became highly recognisable in the emerging periodical press of the Victorian era. Indeed, weekly publications such as *Penny Magazine* employed wood blocks to print high-quality images. By 1833, the techniques of wood engraving, combined with the increased speed of a steam printing press, allowed *Penny Magazine* to circulate several thousand copies. These technological innovations enhanced what is known as the "popular pictorial experience" (Anderson 1991: 16). In other words, the practice of giving portraits of eminent men in newspapers had become so ubiquitous that readers could hardly buy a copy of any journal without seeing one or two examples of this kind of visual representation.

Not only were there substantially more images in periodicals, but there was also a much wider range of illustrations, varying in content, quality, and style. More expensive weekly newspapers such as the *Illustrated London News* and its later rival, the *Graphic*, both sold at sixpence a copy and aimed to provide high-quality pictures that rendered notable public events and people with naturalistic precision (Clarke 2004). Moreover, comic periodicals, like *Punch*, resorted to wood engraving to satirise and caricature famous personalities. In other words, a massive presence of images and sketches in newspapers, magazines, and light publications helped make celebrities and celebrity authors a staple of the

Victorian reader's "pictorial world" (Anderson 1991: 17). Art scholar Audrey Linkman estimates that, thanks to the innovation in visual technology, "the number of commercial photographers in Britain grew by over a thousand percent, from about twelve in 1851 to 155 in 1857" (Linkman 1993: 28). By mid-century, therefore, being seen, whether in painting, in print or in person, was a vital element of becoming a literary celebrity[1].

2. Wilde exposed

By the time Wilde was convicted of "gross indecency" and incarcerated in 1895, illustration had become a requisite feature not only of comic periodicals like *Punch* and *Judy*, but also of sensational newspapers such as the *Illustrated Police News*, a publication which featured the British author on its cover more than once. Nowadays, Wilde's face still remains well known, thanks to the iconic series of photographs taken by Napoleon Sarony in 1882 to promote the author's North American lecture tour. Specifically, through the technological innovations introduced with the Graphic Revolution, images were greatly refined in quality and, above all, the new mechanical reproduction system would lead to an undermining of the boundaries between invention and imitation, original and copy, for years to come.

Wilde has probably been one the most tragic victims of celebrity culture. It is not a mystery that he aimed to acquire "success: fame or even notoriety" (Holland 1997: 44), and, with the advantage of hindsight, we know he got much more of the latter than he bargained for. As Wilde understood, Victorian celebrity culture carried within it the twin potential for both fame and notoriety: for hero-worship and fandom, on the one hand, and fascinated

[1] Alongside recent sociological theorisations inspired by Niklas Luhmann or Erving Goffman on mass-media communication and the notion of reality as an interactive and 'ludic' product, see the well-known tenets by Jürgen Habermas and Marshall McLuhan. Both Habermas ([1962] 1989) and McLuhan (1964) stress that the medium plays a fundamental role in the transmitter/receiver process. Specifically, they argue that it is the medium itself that controls the receiver's perception of a message, rather than the content that is being mediated. In particular, that the rise of newer media systems and advertising, combined with the field of public relations, is able to distort the collective sphere and manipulate public opinion.

disgust and morbid curiosity, on the other. In his 1938 preface to Frank Harris's controversial biography, *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* (1916), George Bernard Shaw maintained that "Wilde's permanent celebrity belongs to literature, and only his transient notoriety to the police news" (Shaw 1993: 3). Though Shaw's juxtaposition of "permanent celebrity" and "transient notoriety" may sound contradictory because of its oxymoronic nature, scholars agree that Wilde occupies a permanent place in both literary and celebrity history. Unlike Lord Byron, who claimed he awoke to find himself famous, scholars often cast Wilde as the sole agent of his own celebrity, positioning him as a *self-inventor*, *self-fashioner*, and *self-promoter*. Regenia Gagnier (1986) also argues that Wilde 'marketed' himself as a dandy, i.e. a figure who exists apart from bourgeois society, by participating in the very commodity culture that Aestheticism purported to condemn. For her part, Jerusha McCormack highlights the reciprocal relation "between Wilde's reinventions of himself and his invention of the fragmented identity that is modern Irishness" (McCormack 1998: 2), with Shelton Waldrep contending that Wilde's art, sexuality, and celebrity are the main requisites to create an "aesthetics of self-invention" (Waldrep 2004: 12).

Similarly, in his study of Wilde's American lecture tour, David Friedman states that the author

> devised a groundbreaking formula for manufacturing fame – one that is still used by many aspiring celebrities today, whether they know it or not. Decades before Norman Mailer, Wilde knew the value of "advertisements for myself." Decades before Andy Warhol, he saw the beauty in commerce and the importance of image in marketing. Decades before Kim Kardashian, he grasped that fame could be fabricated in the media. (Friedman 2014: 16)

From this perspective, Wilde created modern celebrity by inventing his own image, by manufacturing his own fame years before he had published anything *to be known for*. During his 1882 lecture tour across the United States – a tour designed to promote the American run of W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's satirical piece, *Patience* (1881) – Wilde no doubt drew crowds and publicity worthy of comparison to Kim Kardashian.

There are several issues, however, with the repeated references to Wilde as self-inventor. Wilde's notoriety in the United States was

linked to American audiences' doubts about his inventiveness and his authenticity as the inspiration for the most popular caricatures of the period. Was Wilde *the original* on whom George du Maurier's *Punch* caricatures and *Patience* star, Reginald Bunthorne, were based? Was Wilde real, so to speak, or just a poser? Could Wilde possibly be as inflated in person as Du Maurier's and Gilbert and Sullivan's caricatures, or dissatisfyingly more ordinary? These discrepancies between original and copy, invention and imitation, authenticity and forgery were categories Wilde troubled at almost every opportunity. Nevertheless, they were the basic terms on which he was received by the American press. In particular, determining how the Graphic Revolution is ingrained in Wilde's celebrity inevitably raises the question of original and copy mentioned above. This aspect is patent in the press coverage surrounding Wilde's tour, which also saw a visible disappointment with the author's bodily manifestations. Indeed, if British onlookers expected Alfred Tennyson to be a living statue, American audiences wanted Wilde to be a living caricature. This desire is the reason why I suggest that Wilde forged his celebrity as much as he invented it: he created an image that was meant to obscure the concept of a single, authentic original and blur the boundaries between what was perceived as genuine and what, on the contrary, appeared as subtly artificial.

This position is reinforced by what James McNeill Whistler wrote in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* when he reconstructed the encounter with Du Maurier and Wilde lampooning each other. It was at that precise moment that Whistler approached his famous guests and said: "Which of you two invented the other, eh?" (Whistler 1890: 241). Two years after this encounter, the *New York Times* published an article whose title was "Did Sarony Invent Oscar Wilde?", reporting details of the 1884 case in which photographer Sarony sued Burrow-Giles Lithographic Company for the rights to the pictures taken of Wilde on the occasion of the American tour. Ascertaining that Sarony was right meant that he could prove that he was the creator – the inventor – of Wilde's stances. These two episodes underline an intriguing facet of Wilde's celebrity. Indeed, in his 1882 tour, he was not perceived as the inventor of his own image. Rather, his notoriety was seen as being invented by those who represented him visually – in caricature, on the stage and in photography, especially. My point here is not to suggest that Wilde

had no hand in making himself well known – he did – nor do I mean to suggest that Wilde was particularly overwhelmed by the vast congerie of his visual representations. That the self-proclaimed 'Professor of Aesthetics' wanted to become famous is evident. That he designed his own clothes and distributed his manuscripts to anyone who would have them, and requested lithographs to accompany his lectures throughout the tour, is likewise doubtless. But Wilde's reputation – that is in large part well deserved – as a complete self-inventor overestimates the degree to which he was seen as the unique creator of his own image during his stay in America. To paraphrase one of Wilde's epigrams, the question of whether his image imitated the Aesthetic type or vice versa – that is, whether he was the original or merely a copy – was what propelled the formation process of his celebrity, even during his first few years in London. In *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions*, Harris, the editor of the *Fortnightly Review* and friend to Wilde, claimed that when the latter arrived in London,

> he stepped boldly into the limelight, going to all 'first nights,' and taking the floor on all occasions […] He began to go abroad in the evening in knee breeches and silk stockings wearing strange flowers in his coat – green cornflowers and gilded lilies – while […] proclaiming the strange creed that nothing succeeds like excess. Very soon his name came into everyone's mouth; London talked of him and discussed him at a thousand tea-tables. For one invitation he had received before, a dozen now poured in; he became a celebrity. (Harris [1916] 1974: 61)

Though Wilde was "discussed [...] at a thousand tea-tables" in London, whether for his epigrams or his eccentric clothing, he did not turn into a celebrity until he became visible in the British press, between April 1880 and March 1881. The cartoons and caricatures of *Fun*, *Punch*, and *The Entr'acte* made Wilde both visible and recognisable to a broader readership, not just a subject of gossip in fashionable London coteries. While Wilde's visibility was vital for the achievement of fame, the image for which he became known was not entirely the result of his own genius. Curiously, like Charles Dickens before him, Wilde did not become recognisable through naturalistic or physically *accurate* portraits. He became familiar to readers as a living cartoon. His caricatures in the British and American press as well as on stage shaped audiences' expectations

for Wilde's appearance. If Du Maurier's drawings included several references to Wilde's somatic features, Alfred Bryan – who worked for *The Entr'acte* – went further by explicitly tracing his drawings to Wilde's name. As a consequence, though Wilde had not yet published any literary works, his caricature, which appeared on March 26, 1881, established all of the farcical features which regularly recurred in his following visual representations. In particular, emerging as distinctive traits were his disproportionately large head and his hands resting on it. This pose would reappear in promotional photographs taken on the tour.

Harris claims that Wilde's recognisability in the press helped him get his first book of poems published: "He had been trying off and on for nearly a year to get it [*Poems*] published. The publishers told him roundly that there was no money in poetry and refused the risk" (Harris [1916] 1974: 67). Moreover, writing to the manager of his American tour, W.F. Morse, in 1882, Wilde sounded very satisfied with his caricatures, although he added that "I regard all caricature and satire as absolutely beneath notice" (Wilde 2000: 174). The irony is that, in the same letter, Wilde said that he was displeased first by the content of several articles about him in the local press, and secondly by the fact that his caricatures were not mentioned. This sort of ambivalent relationship with his parody-makers is somehow reinforced by Richard Ellmann, who states that Wilde was a willing participant in his own caricatures because "to be derided was part of the plan" (Ellmann [1987] 1988: 137). If, as Lord Henry claims in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), there is only one thing worse than being talked about, and that is *not* being talked about, then perhaps for Wilde the only thing worse than being parodied was being ignored by the press.

In *Gilbert and Sullivan: Genre, Gender, Parody*, Carolyn Williams has questioned the assumption that Wilde alone was the inspiration for Bunthorne. She maintains that *Punch* drawings were used as prime sources for the piece:

> In relation to *Patience* […] it has often been said that Wilde was the model for Bunthorne, while in fact the opposite was true. Bunthorne was the model that Wilde attempted both to imitate and to prefigure on his American lecture tour. Wilde acted as Bunthorne's avatar. In cultural history, 'Wilde' was in part a spin-off product. (Williams 2011: 165)

This view is strengthened by Wilde's American press reception when he arrived in New York in the late evening of January 2, 1882. Organised as a sort of advertising campaign, Wilde's tour was, in many ways, something highly innovative and maybe confusing for the local journalists. As it happens, the American press cultivated the arbitrary belief that the actor Bunthorne was the *original* and Wilde the *copy*. To paraphrase Hans Robert Jauss's theory, the press's horizon of expectations had somehow already been drastically defined and influenced by Du Maurier's caricatures and by *Patience*'s parody. Indeed, Wilde did not come to the United States by popular demand or as other literary celebrities, such as Dickens, had. Rather, before his arrival in New York, American audiences knew very little about him. To address this issue, Richard D'Oyly Carte, Wilde's producer, organised a massive promotional campaign, sending out invitations for Wilde's Chickering Hall lecture scheduled for January 9. The invitation contained an eight-page pamphlet titled *Oscar Wilde's Visit to America*, which included a biography of the author and several positive reviews of his works in Britain. The promotional campaign was very successful. Wilde immediately became a topic in the press well before he was in the United States. This success is also confirmed by a number of articles published in the local press after he arrived. In particular, we can quote the report of an anonymous contributor to the *Standard Programme*:

> So far we Americans have heard only the distant sound of that wave of aestheticism which has swept all of England. We do not yet understand quite what it all is, either in origin or result, quite what has produced in England, the feeling that *Intensity* must be expressed in one's garments, one's literature, one's walls and carpets […] What we know is that Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* emerged from the chaos of a war between the real, Aestheticism, and the imitation, the Aesthetes. (qtd. in Hofer and Scharnhorst 2010: 49)

Though Wilde is not formally cited in this article, the divergence between the Aesthete and Aestheticism points to the scorching debate around Wilde's growing celebrity in the United States. Just as Bunthorne was exposed as an 'aesthetic sham' in *Patience*, the question of whether Wilde, too, might be an impostor was the main

topic addressed by the press before and during his lecture tour. Americans did not want to be deceived by a sort of puppet: was Wilde anything more than a publicity stunt? Was he merely an imitation or could he actually be considered as a serious representative of Aestheticism? When Wilde finally arrived in New York and gave his first lecture, the moment of truth had come. In a *Nation* article published shortly after Wilde's lecture, the reviewer summed up his reaction in this way:

> In the present days of easily-manufactured notoriety, a young man who has managed to establish a doubt in the minds of the public as to whether he is a profound thinker or an utter fool may be said to be on the high road to a very good substitute for fame [...] and this is what Mr. Wilde had previous to his lecture succeeded in doing. However, what Wilde has to say is not new and his extravagance is not extravagant enough to amuse the average American audience. His knee-breeches and long hair are good as far as they go; but Bunthorne has really spoiled the public for Wilde. (qtd. in Hofer and Scharnhorst 2010: 40)

If it is true that Wilde was defined as a profound thinker who used his chameleon-like power of imitative reproduction to present other well-established artists, what we read at the end of the *Nation* article is at least peculiar and unexpected. Even though the writer admits that Wilde is not a bluff, he keeps on arguing that his extravagance was not enough to entertain the audience. In other words – overturning the question – the columnist admitted that the main problem with Wilde's tour was that the *original* did not sound as good as his own caricature. Within the first days of his tour, pointing out the discrepancies between Wilde's physical appearance and the image of the stereotyped Aesthete became a nearly ubiquitous feature of the press coverage. As highlighted by Merlin Holland, Wilde's grandchild, many articles underlined that

> [the] most striking thing about the poet's appearance is his height, which is several inches over six feet […] Instead of having a small delicate hand only fit to caress a lily, his fingers are long and when doubled up would hit a hard knock, should an occasion arise for the owner to descend to that kind of argument. (Holland 1997: 95)

Whether Wilde was copying Du Maurier's and Gilbert and Sullivan's parodies or not, the controversies surrounding Sarony's

photographs confirmed that, legally, Wilde did not *invent* the poses that helped make him famous. As a matter of fact, in December 1883, Sarony sued Burrow-Giles Lithographic Company for the rights of Wilde's photographs and the Supreme Court ruled in his favour. While the ruling was seminal in the formulation of copyright law, it also confirmed that Wilde had no rights to his own image – a circumstance that fuelled further criticism about Wilde not being the original on whom his parodies were based.

In conclusion, Wilde was destined to simultaneously meet and disappoint his audience's expectations, as further testified by an article from the *St. Louis Republican*, whose anonymous author convincingly illustrated this two-fold position:

> [C]aricatures of Wilde are like the reflection of the convex mirror, faithful yet distorted. No one seeing the true Oscar Wilde could fail to recognize him from them, and no one of any perception could fail to recognize just as clearly that the man is not what has been described. The pictures have at once been true and untrue, with the untruth predominating. (qtd. in Hofer and Scharnhorst 2010: 74)

In essence, Wilde is a *unicum* in literature and celebrity culture, being at once ascertainable and unrecognisable, false and real, imitation and copy. From this perspective, in a Derridean echo, Wilde was 'undecidable'. Probably his growing celebrity was the result of opposite instances that overshadowed and undermined the very perception of what was considered as original, and vice versa. In a reformulation of the phrase from the *St. Louis Republican*, Wilde's celebrity was not generated from the reflection of a single convex mirror; rather, it was the sum of all the reflections in a hall of convex mirrors.

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