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Brian Hancock
University of Kentucky, bmhancock@bellsouth.net

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Observing Art through the Lens of Oscar Wilde

“All art is quite useless.” - Oscar Wilde

Throughout the existence of mankind, art has been defined in many ways. Between 27th century BCE and 15th century BCE, the Minoan civilization identified art as ceramics, frescos and landscapes. At the time of the First Qin Emperor, Qin Shi Huang, in 210 BE, the Chinese defined art as 8,099 individual and life-size terracotta figures, which were buried alongside him in his tomb. And of course the Egyptians created art forms ranging from papyrus drawings to hieroglyphics to pyramids from 5000 BCE to approximately 500 AD. Indeed, art has been created in many different ways by many different peoples throughout all of history.

Oscar Wilde came upon the art scene around 1880 AD. In 1881, he published his first collection of poems at the age of twenty-seven. As the years passed, his definition of art expanded to include short stories, essays, plays and a novel. Throughout these years, Wilde gained much notoriety in England, as his works grew in popularity.

As the eighties turned into the nineties, Wilde’s momentum grew still. His novel The Picture of Dorian Gray was published in 1890. Though widely criticized, it was an innovative work of art, and as Wilde would later note, ‘no criticism is bad criticism.’ Wilde’s name consequently became circulated in larger spheres throughout London. Infamous Irish poet William Yeats even commented upon the novel, claiming that “with all its faults, it is a wonderful book” (Ruduzki).
As the nineties rolled on, Wilde strode into his greatest period of success. From 1892-1898 he published four plays – *Salome, Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which debuted on Valentine’s Day of 1895, was perhaps Wilde’s most successful play. It debuted at the St. James Theatre in London – the theatre of theatres in that day. According to one report, the audience “included many members of the great and good, former cabinet ministers and privy councillors, as well as actors, writers, academics, and enthusiasts” (Pable).

It is thus displayed that Oscar Wilde was one of the leading artists of his day, and navigated a plethora of forms of aesthetic composition. He was both criticized and admired by leading critics and societal figures of his day, and the overall success of his body of work cannot be disputed. Throughout his life his popularity and quality of work only grew.

It must be concluded, then, that Oscar Wilde was qualified to discuss and define art. Though history has seen an exponential amount of artistic icons who have attempted to place art in its proper sphere, perhaps there is none more intriguing than Oscar Wilde. He was a man who not only excelled in his field, but also identified and defined it more uniquely and interestingly than any of his contemporaries and possibly any subsequent generation. From his claim of art’s uselessness to his belief in life’s imitation of art to art’s destruction of the monotony of society, Wilde’s viewpoints on art are as broad as they are captivating.

Wilde defines the role of an artist in his essay *The Critic as Artist*, published in a collection of essays called *Intentions* in 1891. He explains that critics are needed because artists are individually motivated. A good artist, Wilde explicates, has such a distinctive style that he cannot see the beauty in, nor appreciate, another artist’s work. Wilde cites the example of Percy Shelley, who, “with his dislike of actuality was deaf to Wordsworth’s message” (Critic 44).
Wilde argues that a critic’s faculty is even higher than an artist’s in that a critic is guided by a conscious aesthetic sense and is necessarily subjective. A critic, then, must simultaneously be aware of the artist’s frame of mind while also being critical of it. Wilde thus unveils the artist’s role and line of thought as it is related to the critic:

This, also, is the explanation of the value of limitations in art. The sculptor gladly surrenders imitative colour, and the painter the actual dimensions of form, because by such renunciations they are able to avoid too definite a presentation of the Real, which would be mere imitation, and too definite a realisation of the Ideal, which would be too purely intellectual. It is through its very incompleteness that art becomes complete in beauty and so addresses itself, not to the faculty of recognition nor to the faculty of reason, but to the aesthetic sense alone (Critic 22).

Wilde explains art as a product which can be neither too real nor ideal. The artist must embrace incompleteness and cherish the aesthetic sense if he is to be successful. In the same breath, Wilde knew that the artist must be an individualist. An artist must not be swayed by public opinion, or concerned with the trivial judgment of others. An artist must seek to create from within. In his essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, he explains that “the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or an amusing craftsman...Art is the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known. I am inclined to say that it is the only real mode of Individualism that the world has known” (Soul). Wilde is forthright and confident in his definition and discussions of art. He had a definite grasp of what an artist must endeavor to accomplish if he is to truly carry out the craft. He was both inclined and qualified to expertly discuss the subject.
With consideration given to Wilde’s definition of art, focus will now shift to his views on the subject. As an artist, Wilde expressed many of his views on art through his art. Often, he utilized characters as devices through which he could express his own views. In his essay, *The Decay of Lying*, he argues against the notion that nature is a form of artistic inspiration through the character Vivian. Insight, he claims, “is not to be found in Nature herself. It resides in the imagination, or fancy, or cultivated blindness of the man who looks at her” (Decay 1). Wilde instead believes that art is a lens through which individuals experience nature; that one views streets and mountaintops and hospitals and shoes the way they are portrayed in specific works of art. Vivian continues:

We have all seen in our own day in England how a certain curious and fascinating type of beauty, invented and emphasised by two imaginative painters, has so influenced Life that whenever one goes to a private view or to an artistic salon one sees, here the mystic eyes of Rossetti’s dream, the long ivory throat, the strange squarecut jaw, the loosened shadowy hair that he so ardently loved, there the sweet maidenhood of The Golden Stair, the blossomlike mouth and weary loveliness of the Laus Amoris, the passionpale face of Andromeda, the thin hands and lithe beauty of the Vivien in Merlin's Dream (Decay 10).

In this instance, Wilde promotes art to a greater reality than nature herself. He argues that experiencing nature is simply not enough, and whether one prefers it or not often one will re-imagine and try to recapture art as they deal with everyday natural objects. One cannot interact in an artistic salon without recalling and ‘seeing’ “the mystic eyes of Rossetti’s throat…[and] the passionpale face of Andromeda.” According to Wilde, art bleeds into our everyday lives, and makes our existence all the richer because of it.
He concludes *The Decay of Lying* by finally revealing that “the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art” (Decay 17). In conjunction with his argument on nature, it seems as though Wilde is championing the mystical over the everyday. He believes that lies, or the enhancement of everyday objects, are preferable to reality. If art captures “the loosened shadowy hair that he so ardently loved,” and this is the memory that lingers within the viewer’s mind, perhaps, though untrue, it is still better than hair one observes with his own eyes.

In his essay *The Artist as Critic*, Wilde further elaborates on this idea, as the character Earnest wonders “why cannot the artist be left alone, to create a new world if he wishes it, or, if not, to shadow forth the world which we already know, and of which, I fancy, we would each one of us be wearied if art, with her fine spirit of choice and delicate instinct of selection, did not, as it were, purify it for us, and give to it a momentary perfection” (Critic 3). Wilde believes art alleviates humanity from the monotony of everyday life. Art, according to Wilde, “purifies” the world around us and idyllically captures it for us, so that we might experience our surroundings in a completely perfect way. According to Wilde, art should not be relegated for being untrue, but rather be rejoiced for being so. A good artist is masterful in that he can transcend reality, and conceivably catalyze a new reality within the mind of an individual. In *The Critic as Artist*, the character Gilbert notes that “the real artist becomes not merely a material element of metrical beauty, but a spiritual element of thought and passion also, waking a new mood, it may be, or stirring a fresh train of ideas, or opening by mere sweetness and suggestion of sound some golden door at which the Imagination itself had knocked in vain” (Critic 4). Wilde thus elevates the artist to a spiritual status, finalizing art’s departure from the everyday, tangible life. Art lies not even within the physical realm, he argues, but rather is derived from spiritual inclinations. The world is old and outdated while art is fresh and innovative. An artist is divinely inspired, it
seems, according to Wilde. Art derives nothing from life; it only enhances one’s experience of it.

Wilde elevates this idea of art as superior to nature to another level in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Within this highly critiqued work, Wilde seeks not to rank art and life, but rather to alienate the two entities. Lord Henry, who serves as the medium through which Wilde expresses his views in the novel, states that ”an artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty” (Picture 13). Lord Henry firmly believes that art should not be influenced by one’s surroundings. Doing so would taint the work. If art, he argues, is controlled by one’s natural surroundings, then it fails to be art and rather simply becomes a naturalistic representation. By taking into context Wilde’s viewpoint of art as superior to nature as well, we have now arrived at the idea that art is superior to nature *because* it is independent of nature. Art is a medium of fantasy, innovation and the sublime. It is a vehicle to escape nature, and must be acknowledged as such.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains several additional examples which reinforce this point. As Lord Henry sits on the terrace one afternoon with Dorian, he begins to voice his opinion on his friend the artist Basil, claiming that Basil “puts everything that is charming in him into his work. The consequence is that he has nothing left for life but his prejudices, his principles, and his common sense. The only artists I have ever known who are personally delightful are bad artists” (Picture 52). With this statement, Lord Henry provides a concrete example of how life must be alienated from art. In his eyes, and perhaps in those of Wilde, art and life cannot coexist. Either an artist invests himself into his work and has nothing left to give,
or he fails and has plenty to give. To be a stellar artist as well as an intriguing human being simply is not feasible.

Sibyl, the actress whom Dorian briefly falls in love with, is another such example of the disparity between life and art. Sibyl is a wondrous artist in the form of theatre. She realizes, however, that she desires real love more than her art. As she increasingly loves Dorian, she increasingly fails at her art. Sibyl must be both a lover and an artist to properly please Dorian, however. It soon becomes evident that this is not possible, for Sibyl can only invest herself in her love for Dorian. She simply does not have the capability to do both. Dorian, the tragic character of the novel, fails to understand this, and grows angry with Sibyl, yelling, "You have spoiled the romance of my life. How little you can know of love, if you say it mars your art! Without your art, you are nothing" (Picture 79). Dorian wants Sibyl to be what Wilde will not let her be – a talented artist and a wonderful lover. Wilde portrays Dorian as enraged and immature for desiring both. Ultimately, Sibyl’s inability to both love and act results in the conclusion of their relationship, and subsequently Sibyl’s tragic death. Again, Wilde highlights the impossibility of the coexistence of life and art.

Perhaps the starkest example of this point comes through the life of Dorian himself. Dorian is a sedentary character in the novel. Living off an inheritance, he does not work or attempt creative pursuits. Lord Henry acknowledges this, and praises Dorian for not doing so, proclaiming “I am so glad that you have never done anything, never carved a statue, or painted a picture, or produced anything outside of yourself! Life has been your art. You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets" (Picture 191). Once more, Lord Henry acts as a vehicle for Wilde to express his views. He asserts that as long as Dorian does not practice art, he will maintain his beauty. Dorian’s beauty acts as a parallel to Sibyl’s love.
Dorian’s beauty, however, eventually becomes a substitute for his art. In life, he aims to be both beautiful (his art) as well as popular (his life), and Wilde shows that this cannot be true. Dorian maintains his popularity by hosting and attending parties, indulging in common substances, etc, but his beauty, his art, cannot be simultaneously sustained. Through the form of Basil’s portrait, Dorian’s face becomes increasingly unsightly. Slowly, it loses its boyish charm, and ultimately evolves into a hideous face. The painting, the reader learns, is meant to replace Dorian himself. When Dorian lies or indulges in drugs or women, his face grows uglier. Dorian’s art and life cannot coexist. As he maintains his lifestyle, his art suffers.

Through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde emphasizes the impossibility of relation between life and art. Through the clever devices of Basil, Sibyl and Dorian, Wilde subtly makes his point by way of narrative. This technique proves effective; these tangible examples are both intriguing and believable. In the form of art, Wilde makes real and sensible the contrast and incongruity present in his mind between art and life.

We have thus navigated parts of the essays *The Decay of Lying* and *The Critic as Artist*, and *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, as well as the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and learned that according to Wilde life imitates art, but moreover that life and art are separate entities that cannot truly coexist.

In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Wilde considers this point in a new light. Instead of alienating art from life, he attempts to estrange art from society. Wilde argues that for art to be impactful, it must be detached from society. Rather than conform to society’s popular line of thought, good artists seek to challenge it, thus broadening society’s scope. Art, therefore, must be independent of society not because it is better than society, but because its purpose is to enlighten society. Wilde notes that the public should understand and accept this point of view,
declaring that “Art is like a science or a philosophy in that it should not try to appease the public, but rather the public should be learned of it” (Soul). If the artist strives to produce a work that will be accepted by society, then he is doing society no service at all. Instead, society should observe and interact with art, and attempt to gain something from it. Wilde expounds upon his examples of science and philosophy to further support his claim:

If a man of science were told that the results of his experiments, and the conclusions that he arrived at, should be of such a character that they would not upset the received popular notions on the subject, or disturb popular prejudice, or hurt the sensibilities of people who knew nothing about science; if a philosopher were told that he had a perfect right to speculate in the highest spheres of thought, provided that he arrived at the same conclusions as were held by those who had never thought in any sphere at all – well, nowadays the man of science and the philosopher would be considerably amused (Soul).

It is here that Wilde reveals the exact purpose of art in the world. Like science and philosophy, art is meant to stretch the human understanding of the world. Art is meant to initially be confusing and difficult to grasp, with the hope that it will someday be grasped and absorbed. By attempting to come to this end, the public is doing itself a favor. It is broadening its horizons and expanding its view. Through The Decay of Lying, The Critic as Artist and The Soul of Man Under Socialism, Wilde reveals that all good art should be independent of life, and by doing so offer new and unique perspectives to life. Art, then, indeed occupies a spiritual sphere, where individuals can come to greater understandings of their respective lives through their interaction with it. It is a changing force that destroys the uniformity of society and life.

In relation to its capacity to expand one’s horizons, Wilde argues that art relieves one from the monotony of life as well. In The Soul of Man Under Socialism, Wilde claims that “art
is Individualism, and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine” (Soul). Wilde thus portrays art as an agent of change. It dispels societal cobwebs and induces new ways of thinking. To be habitual is to be dead in the eyes of Wilde, and art is the primary medium through which to avoid that terrible reality. Art seeks to transform, to renovate, and to inspire. Art is independent of the cyclical order of daily life, and consequently infuses emotion and drive into the human experience.

Until this point, Wilde’s essays have shed light on the disparity between art and other entities such as life, beauty, love and society. He has set art aside, and framed his arguments with art as one entity and objects such as life or the world as another. In De Profundis, however, Wilde strikes a new tone. The letter, written by Wilde to Lord Alfred Douglas while he was imprisoned in Reading Gaol, speaks of both Douglass’s vanity and Wilde’s growing affection for Jesus Christ. In the letter, Wilde speaks of art in terms of unity rather than disparity. He expresses an inward vision of art as opposed to an outward perspective. Wilde writes, “What the artist is always looking for is the mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which form reveals” (De Profundis 14). Though he has isolated art from a bevy of entities, Wilde sought to unify the artist in the letter to Douglass. He attempted to explain the inner workings of the successful artist as those in which “soul and body are one and indivisible.” One’s inspiration and application should come from within, he reasoned. By doing so, “the body becomes instinct with the spirit…[and] truth in art” (De Profundis 15) is formed. Wilde characterizes the artist, then, as an island which must be in perfect harmony with itself, away from the distractions and
opinions of society, yet occupying a place of spiritual and physical synchronization. The artist must be at peace with himself in order to inspire and challenge others.

Oscar Wilde clearly maintained an opinion or two on the subject of art. He sought to elevate its importance over that of nature, to alienate it completely from life, to declare it independent of society, to illustrate it as a disperser of monotony, and to teach its dependence on inner unity. He wrote passionately of art and its unlimited potential, and scornfully of all those who failed to grasp this understanding and remained complacent in their unchanging everyday lives. Art to Wilde was a vehicle through which to perceive, as well as change, the world. It was an entity with the potential to captivate, with the capacity to inspire, and with the ability to make the world a more ideal place. He longed for the world to be as ideal as art itself, and sustained the hope that continual focus and deliberation on art would one day catalyze this occurrence.
Works Cited


