IN THE EVENT OF OSCAR WILDE: PERSONAL APPEARANCE IN THE 1880s

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In May 1885 *The Queen* magazine reported a 'Private View' held at the fashionable Grosvenor Gallery:

> ALL THE WORLD WAS THERE, that is all that world the members of which are somebodies. The living show was more interesting than the pictures. Everybody looked at everybody else, and everybody trod upon everybody else's toes; as those toes were, as a rule illustrious, the experience passed as pleasant. Over the multitude of lesser luminaries in literature, painting, acting, music, criticism, not a few of the greater luminaries ruled benignant. Between four and five o'clock, the press was so great, that it became a problem how to advance or retreat, but at the recognition of so many gifted folk, a reviving sense of the cleverness of our generation observed the flagging spirits of exhausted visitors. A young enthusiast was hear to declare, that she was 'quite set up,' because she had been jammed up right against Mr Matthew Arnold in the doorway and bumped against Mr Browning, as the poet stood near the portrait painted of him by his son, in his Oxford scarlet robes of doctor and the blue hood of the Edinburgh University. Here might be seen Mr Holman Hunt with Mrs Holman Hunt in a quaintly made gown of pale violet plush, in animated talk with Mrs Antoinette Stirling, the dark costume of the latter lady relieved by knots of golden ribbon...

About four o'clock a stir though the crowd announced an interesting arrival, and Mr and Mrs Oscar Wilde were perceived making their way through the crowd. The apostle of reform in masculine costume, as far as we could discern, practically advocated his tenets only by lengthened cuffs and collar, by lowered crown and a broadened brim to his hat. Mrs Oscar Wilde wore a fawn-grey woollen gown, the short waist bound by a wide salmon-pink sash, tied behind by a loose knot: the hat, an adaptation of the Tam o'Shanter shape, and of the medieval German-student cap, was made of the same material as the dress, and trimmed with the same shade of pink as the sash; a large Vandyke lace collar, a necklace of quaint many-coloured beads, and a cluster of double daffodils completed the costume.[1]

A rival publication, *The Lady*, reported the same occasion:

In the annals of private views there was never remembered such a crush, the multitude of panting individuals packed in solid squares repeated to each other. Doubtless the tedium of physical inactivity was compensated to the mass, by the exhilarating sense it brought of being "in the artistic movement of the day." It was impossible to see the pictures, but then there were present a host of notabilities, and on private view day it is the people, not the pictures, the multitudes flocks to see…

As the crush grew less the scene grew in charm. The elegance, the eccentricity, the quiet taste, the shrill discord that marked a number of costumes, became more apparent… Mrs Oscar Wilde looked quaintly picturesque in an uncompromisingly correct brown Directoire cloak, with pocket flaps close to the armpits, and large yellow buttons; the hat, lifted at the back. The fashions of the Directoire period informed a number of headgears.[2]

Two years later and the Wildes were still making a splash at the Grosvenor. In January 1887 the 'Boudoir Gossip' column of the *Court and Society Review* reports

both present at the Private View, the collaborative nature of their relationship, their shared interests, still made visible in their choice of clothes:

Mr and Mrs Oscar Wilde were both dressed in green, and their attendance was calculated to make a sunshine in a shady place. The aesthetic poet wore a bottle-green coat with a sable collar, and his wife was attired in a moss-green plush dress and mantle, edged with iridescent beads, long tan gloves to the elbow, a grey-fur boa, and a hat of the colour of her dress, trimmed with rose-coloured feathers. [3]

All these reports make the 'Aesthetic' Grosvenor Gallery seem very special, and in many ways it was, but, in fact, such occasions and such reports were extremely frequent in the late nineteenth century. Similar social occasions included theatrical 'First Night' parties and what were called 'At Homes' when a host (or, more likely, a hostess) would provide entertainment, food and drink in their own drawing-room. These were precisely the kind of event at which the Wildes excelled. Reading the gossip columns of the time it sometimes seems that the couple (though Oscar was increasingly without his wife in the later 1880s and early 1890s) went out every night of the week and that there was hardly a writer, politician or painter with whom he wasn't on party-going terms: Robert Browning, George Meredith, Henry Irving, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Lord Leighton, Burne-Jones, Andrew Lang, Edmund Gosse, Henry James … these are the names that crop up again and again.

What were they like these events? What did they have in common with one another? What function did they serve? Why did people go to them? Here are some of the questions I would like to ask – bearing in mind the fact that they still take place in our contemporary world. Critics such as Josephine Guy, Ian Small and Regenia Gagnier have successfully located Wilde's career within the economic structures of his day but they have not, I believe, spent much time exploring the places and spaces where they were in operation and where, indeed, similar behaviour can still be observed today.[4]

We can start by noting that although they are delineated by space and time these

gatherings are supplementary, justified only by a main event. A 'Private View' is set apart from the regular opening times of an exhibition; a 'First Night' reception is not the performance itself but an adjunct; even at an 'At Home' the entertainment is private, supplied for a select audience and performed on terms that are different from a professional display of talent in a theatre or concert hall. Such events have it in common that they require invitations; you can't just turn up or buy a ticket. On the other hand, you don't require any special qualifications other than an invitation. It's who gets the invitation that counts.

To return to Wilde's attendances at the 'Private View's. We know that he was also at the openings of the Royal Academy, the New English Art Club in May 1887[5] and that in November of the same year he attended an evening organised by the Royal Society of British Artists.[6] His appearance is remarked upon in every case.

It was obviously important to dress up for a Private View. Clothes were signal to the whole experience – which suited Wilde very well indeed since clothes had always been always an obsession and, indeed, in the early years of his career, a means to an end. The clothes he wore in Oxford, London and across the United States were chosen to attract attention, which they did with spectacular success. But clothes also composed a topic on which he professed to have particular expertise. He lectured on dress reform across the United Kingdom in the early 1880s, and his first article for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, a paper that was to employ him for more than five years, was on clothes. This argued for a form of dressing that would look back to the past, yet would be ideally suited to the modern world. It would be decorative and yet be highly functional. Developing an aesthetic that sometimes seems very modern, Wilde advocated clothes that would serve their purpose and look good for that very reason. He even wrote in favour of the wooden 'clogs' that were worn by the poor mill-girls working in the North of England on the grounds that not only were they practical, much craftsmanship was expended upon them

> They have been made of lovely woods, and delicately inlaid with ivory, and with mother of pearl. A clog might be a dream of beauty, and, if not too high or too heavy, most comfortable also.[7]

The choice of materials was fundamental. For instance, Wilde 'urged that the basis of dress should be wool, which was the most sanitary of any material, giving the necessary coolness in summer and requisite in winter, advocating further the use of soft brown leather, such as that of which the doublet of former times was made.'[8]

Of course, much of what he had to say on the subject of dress derived from proposals made by the Rational Dress Society. There was the insistence on health and comfort of the wearer, the suitability of a garment for the modern world. Nevertheless, his views on clothes did have a certain idiosyncratic originality. Above all there was the 'Aesthetic' commitment to 'beauty' as he defined it:

> ... beauty is essentially organic; that is, it comes, not from without, but from within - not from any added prettinesses, but from the perfection of its own being; and that consequently, as the body is beautiful, so all apparel that rightly clothes it must be beautiful also in its construction and in its lines.
>
> There is a divine economy about beauty: it gives us just what is needful and no more, whereas ugliness is always extravagant; ugliness is a spendthrift and wastes its material ... beauty is the sign always of the rightness of principles, the mystical seal that is set upon what is perfect, and upon what is perfect only.[9]

Wilde's outspoken principles explain why his critics picked up on more than one aspect of his ideas about dress when they attacked him. There were potential conflicts between function, beauty, comfort as between modern dress and historical precedent. He sometimes seemed to be trying to align himself simultaneously with both an ideal of fashionable elegance and with the reform movements that sought to replace it. Theory and practice were inter-related - but by no means mutually integrated with one another.

And there was the disavowal of anachronism. In the matter of men's dress Wilde set about demolishing the claims put forward by a correspondent to the *Pall Mall*

Gazette for the costume of the last quarter of the eighteenth century over the second quarter of the seventeenth. Forgetting his own previous commitment to knee-breeches, Wilde now advocated something like an adaptation of a seventeenth century riding costume with its doublet buttoned from the shoulder, its loose trousers, its jacket 'not too loose for warmth, or too close for respiration' and its hat with adjustable brim, on the grounds that '*The value of the dress is simply that every separate article of it expresses a law*'. There was nothing anachronistic about this since its benefits would be obvious to anyone 'who desires more than a "fancy dress ball" basis for costume'.[10]

In fact, though, 'fancy dress' is exactly how some of his clothes appeared to other people. They looked as if they went with his overall 'pose' (that denigrating word); they looked as if they were 'costumes'. And his own practice in the matter of dress was in many ways inconsistent, in that he suited garments to occasion in quite subtle and apparently thoughtful ways. It begins to look as if his commitment to Rational Dress was in many ways quite opportunistic. Certainly, when, in his '10 O' Clock Lecture', delivered in 1885, Whistler challenged Wilde's pronouncements on dress insisting that 'Costume is not dress. And the wearers of wardrobes may not be the doctors of taste'. Wilde simply responded by noting with a parenthetical '*O mea culpa!*' that dress reformers were among Whistler's many targets and didn't rise to the bait.

This led to certain complications in perception. An abiding concern with one's dress had, since the early nineteenth century, been seen as an essentially feminine preoccupation, especially where public appearance was concerned. A long article in *The World* from the early1880s entitled and entirely devoted to 'Women at Private Views',[11] distinguished between 'those who dress, those who do not, and those who try and make a mess of it. The latter class is a very large one; the first so small that it hardly amounts to a class at all'. The women who do not make any attempt are the 'writers or artists'. They concentrate on the pictures and 'renounce all attempts to personally please the eyes of men'. They tend to wear shapeless, black garments.

Then there are the 'aggressively pictorial' women, who are the 'goods and chattels of painters and poets'. These wear 'artistic or aesthetic costumes', in 'wonderful and glorious colours, which appear to have been evoked for them out of some old Italian pictures', though they are more interested in colour than in shape. They have the courage to walk about 'like animated sunflowers or promenading poppies', or else they are like they wear 'long, straight, green gowns… like sticks of aspiring asparagus'. They worship the talk of their masters.

The remaining class is made up of women who wear dresses that actually fit them and 'whose idea of colour is 'steel-grey'. Curiously enough these austere creatures are more interested in the 'aesthetic women' than they are in the pictures. 'Women find a strange fascination in gazing upon one another', continues the reporter, 'and when the crowd becomes dense, in the thick of the afternoon, most of them give themselves up to this delight.'

Finally, there is the 'professional beauty' who arrives late and leaves early. 'Perhaps she is fashionable, and wears blue satin and buttercups; perhaps she is artistic, and appears in an enormous Gainsborough hat and a Portia-like mantel. In either case she eclipses her lesser rivals, who all bristle and stare, and vow she is dreadfully overdressed.'

This comically exaggerated but obviously, to a degree, authentic account explains why the costumes Wilde adopted at Private Views and suchlike should have attracted almost as much attention as those of his wife. In terms of gender assumptions alone they were incongruous, startling even. They were an important aspect of that feminised image of Wilde that he seems to have cultivated and which certainly drew the attention of observers, for some of whom the self-consciously adorned male carried messages of ambiguous, if not downright dubious, sexuality.

And yet, of course, in the early days he appeared with his wife, as we have already heard. Clearly a good deal of thought went into the mutual appearance of the Wildes to ensure that everything harmonised. Visual co-ordination or correspondence between garments, between individuals, and between individuals

and their setting, is one of the great aesthetic principles of the 1880s and it straddles art and life. To this extent the process seems more like the composition of a picture, a Whistler portrait, for instance, in which the surroundings actually add something to the presence of the subject. The individual benefits form the aesthetic support or endorsement given by the background but mustn't entirely disappear within, must simultaneously blend in and stand out.

For his portrait of Mrs Francis Leyland painted in the 1870s Whistler created 'a complete aesthetic environment':

> … he designed her dress and the interior of the room as an ensemble. She stands on rush rug with checkerboard stripes in front of low white-panelled dado and a pink wall in a space that suggests a sparsely furnished room, which is, in fact, the drawing room of Whistler's Chelsea house at 2 Lindsey Row. Her pink gown harmonises not only with her reddish brown hair, but with her surroundings. Blossoming almond branches, cut off at the left by the edge of the painting in the manner of a Japanese print, set off the delicacy of the floral appliqués of her dress, while at the right a spray of green foliage points to the artist's prominent butterfly signature.[12]

In pictures such as Whistler's 'Harmony in Pink and Grey: Portrait of Lady Meux' and 'Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink: Portrait of Mrs. Francis Leyland' the background of pink and grey again matches the colours of the dress – which looks like a curtain itself and there's a similarity, though not an exact equivalence, of material.[13]

Nor were Whistlerian harmonies confined to canvas. Having already experimented with the idea in Paris Whistler exhibited his pictures in 1874 in a hired room in Pall Mall which he redecorated 'colouring the walls in maroon, laying a striped yellow matting on the floor, arranging furniture with maroon coverings and blue and white pots with yellow flowers and muting the lighting with blinds.'[14] For his 1883 show 'the rooms were white and yellow, the men wore yellow cravats, and he designed

little velvet butterflies for the women, who were advised to wear black or white so that they might not clash with the décor.[15] "All the world was there – Lady Archie – the Prince… and the Butterfly rampant and all over the place! ... Forty odd superb etchings round the white walls in the exquisite white frames… and finally servants in yellow livery (!)" as Whistler told the American sculptor Waldo Story.'[16]

Whistler continued this concept and a gossip column reported in April 1886 that

> Mr. Whistler proposes to produce a general "harmony" at the private view of his "Paintings – various". The young ladies who will attend to the afternoon tea are to be dressed to match the room, which will be "arranged in brown and gold". Yet more, it is said that Mr. Whistler expects his guests to dress in the colours that he has chosen; and already milliners are busy on "arrangements" to be worn on that occasion. Brown and gold, according to Mr. Whistler, is not, however, the brown and gold of ordinary mortals. The brown is brown-paper colour; the gold, buttercup yellow. It is not easy to match brown-paper in a dress material; and I should not expect it to be a very becoming colour. I advance this opinion with due diffidence, knowing Mr. Whistler to be an authority on dress, while I am but a chronicler of its vagaries.'[17]

Whistler's associates, friends (and sometime models) shared rather similar ideas to these and were equally determined to create total aesthetic environments, even domestic ones, in which they could display themselves to their own best advantage. One thinks of the interiors that Wilde's architect friend E.W.Godwin designed for the house in Tite Street, for instance, an environment that W.B. Yeats was later to describe as being 'perhaps, too perfect in its unity'. Yeats remembers thinking that 'the perfect harmony of his life there, with his beautiful wife and his two young children, suggested some deliberate composition'.[18] Or, much more flamboyant and even more fanciful, we might think of 'The Peacock Room' designed by Whistler for the American, Frederick Leyland.

The studio of the artist Louise Jopling, a good friend of Wilde's who liked to

entertain, was described as 'what Mr. Whistler would call a harmony in white and yellow, and is as fresh, as spring-like, and as gay as an ox-eyed daisy. The walls are yellow, of that bright pale tint of early daffodil, with a dado of pure white', and so on.[19] At Coombe Farm, the Surrey home of Lady Archibald Campbell – a friend of both Whistler and Wilde – one room was decorated almost entirely in shades of red – which, as a reporter gushed, were designed to display the 'delicate and thoroughly original taste of the mistress'.

> You turn out of an old-fashioned corridor with low ceiling and whitewashed walls into a dining-room that Balzac would have described with gusto. It is coloured throughout a glowing red, slightly relieved with gold. The walls are red, the floor is red, the window frame is red, the doors are red, the table and chairs are red, the letter case on the table is red, and there are winged creatures all of red in panels on the walls. This has a sanguinary look upon paper, but a bare enumeration of red walls and red furniture gives no notion whatever of the general effect of the room, which is exceedingly quaint and pleasing.

Adjoining this room was another, the 'Iris Room', which was even more clearly designed to frame the mistress of the house:

> Here all the colours are pale and tender, the foundation being a sort of golden pink. The theme for the decoration is a shell and the room may be described as a harmony in shell tints. The name given to it (reminiscent to some extent of the famous "Peacocks" room) conveys pretty clearly the principle on which the artist is working – the weaving in systematic fashion of the colours of a mother-of-pearl shell throughout the room. On a brass plate on the door are graven Landor's wonderful lines descriptive of a shell.
>
> Penelope sat amongst her maidens and wove strange things in tapestry, Lady Archibald sits with her brushes and palette and paints herself a beautiful shell…
>
> … The window of the Iris parlour, reaching to the ground, opens on a little garden, terraced and sloping, with rustic seats, and the fairest vista of green

> fields and trees. What pleasanter retreat for a lady who has not a little of the student's disposition.'[20]

In her own description of this room Lady Archibald speaks of the wall paintings as having a 'nervy and resolute outline, it is the Iris of pure convention in form and treatment; for, painted in flat colour with little shading, it suggests the spirit rather than the substance'.[21]

There's something curiously animated and accurately organic about this decor – with its 'nervy and resolute' outline – yet the underlying sensitivity to aesthetic effect is similar to Whistler's colour schemes for his exhibitions, or his Sunday Breakfasts which 'provided a carefully constructed stage controlled by the artist to entertain prospective and actual patrons. The rooms were distempered in yellow, sparingly furnished, with carefully placed fans and blue and white china.'[22]

It's this same ideal of harmony that the Wildes tried to incorporate within the modes of self-presentation, including dress, which they adopted on public occasions. But 'Private View's were not fashion shows as such, nor were they beauty contests, nor were they sublimated erotic exhibitions. After all, in the world of pure fashion the point of presentation is that the body should show off the dress, not the body; in the case of erotic display the reverse is the case. But here the ideal is that body and clothes should be equally balanced, should work together. It helps to have what is currently considered to be a 'good' body (something that Wilde never possessed), but it's the choice of the dress, the taste it proclaims, that conveys (or brings out) the distinction of the wearer.

Moreover, the importance of one's choice of clothes lay not only in the fact that they would signal status and attract attention but that they were likely to be read and evaluated according to a complex set of associations. Indeed, it may be that without these associations clothes can barely be read at all. So, for instance, that distinguished scholar of dress, Anne Hollander says that she is 'concerned with how clothes in works of art have been connected with clothes in real life'[23] and that

'Dressing is always picture-making, with reference to actual pictures that indicate how the clothes are to be perceived.'[24]

We've already seen clear evidence of this in the reports that I read earlier of Constance at the Grosvenor galley: her 'medieval German student cap', her 'large Vandyke lace colour' and her 'correct dark brown Directoire cloak'. 'Vandyke' refers to great Flemish Baroque painter: Sir Anthony Van Dyke (1599-1641) whose costumes were revived in the eighteenth century; 'Directoire' to styles of dress in Post-Revolutionary France.

And there's further proof of Anne Hollander's general rule in action in the fashion columns of the day. Their authors were not only knowledgeable about cut and cloth, they knew how to identify and describe clothes by reference to historical, literary, artistic or theatrical echoes. This is spectacularly true of 'Mrs Johnstone' who wrote for *The Woman's World*, the progressive monthly that Wilde edited in 1889. Mrs Johnstone is extraordinarily wide-ranging and yet always precise when she places a new fashion against an aesthetic yardstick. In the course of less than a dozen columns in *The Woman's World* she refers to (among others, this is a very small selection) Louis XV, Goethe, Ruskin and Madame de Stael, as well as to the painters Holbein, Perugino, Gainsborough, Marmontel, and Boucher, the playwrights Massinger, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Goldsmith; and to the novelists Dickens, Ouida and Balzac.[25] One remembers that Roland Barthes described fashion as 'a rudimentary formless novel without temporality.'[26]

But if clothes are to be interpreted in terms of actual or fictional characters and periods does that mean that they are in effect costumes and the unquestionably living and embodied social events that I am interested in are really not so much novelistic as theatrical? After all, at least there's no doubt that they were very often connected with the theatre.

Again, we can trace through newspaper reports and letters Wilde's attendance at functions such as First Night Receptions. He was present at a welcome banquet for the American actor Harry Dixey at the Criterion in May 1886 along with the

playwright Arthur Wing Pinero, the actors Beerbohm Tree, Charles Hawtrey, Squire Bancroft, and many others – a dinner that apparently went on all night.[27] He attended a farewell banquet for the Bancrofts along with Prince of Wales in July.[28] In September he was at the first-night of Henry Irving's *Faust* again with Prince of Wales, Bancrofts, the members of the Rothchild banking family.[29] In December of that year there was a party for Henry Irving at which, according to a report 'the literature of art' was represented by Mr. Comyns Carr and Mr. Oscar Wilde.'[30] At the height of his own fame he still turned out for others. When Tree gave a farewell performance as Hamlet prior to a US tour Wilde was there, as were Mr and Mrs Alma Tadema, Sir Edward Burne-Jones while Mrs. Patrick Campbell was spotted, sitting in her box, wearing a very pretty cloak of some soft-looking white material with big sleeves of orange velvet and bands of sable'.[31]

Of course, the presence of theatrical people doesn't in itself guarantee a theatrical event but is 'theatre' nonetheless the heading under which they really belong? The close connection between fashion and theatre has been established by Kaplan and Stowell in their pioneering book. Thanks to them we know that the experience of going to the theatre in the 1880s and 1890s (and beyond) included admiring (or not) the clothes worn by the actresses (and, to some extent, the actors) in the context of present and future fashion. Would that be enough to make the fashionable event a form of theatre? They do obviously have a certain amount in common.

A basic rule of live theatre – that 'presentation and perception coincide temporally and spatially'[32] – is certainly observed. Theatre demands an audience and, as we have seen, there were audiences present at these events, of two kinds in fact: the other guests and the journalists who may report on and back to Society (with a capital S) and/or the professional worlds of theatre, literature, fashion. Perhaps even these occasions were theatrical to the ironical extent that they were not dramatic: that is, the participants are drawing attention to themselves, not to an adopted or assumed role, not to characterisations other than themselves. But theatre, according to most theoreticians, involves self-consciousness, some awareness, on the part of the performer (even if suppressed or transformed in the actual moment) that he or she actually is performing, and there's not much evidence of that. And it normally

demands some degree of skill (at least we feel short-changed if it doesn't). At the events I've been considering so far a basic human ability to move around a room and carry out a conversation is desirable but even that is not essential. So, audiences, yes; self awareness, possibly; particular skills, no.

But what about movement in the other direction? The fashionable event influenced theatre alright, but did the theatre influence the fashionable event? In the case of the 'At Home' there is some evidence that it did.

Some examples: When the Wildes were invited to Mrs Jenne's 'At Home' in April 1886 they joined 'Mr Walter Pater, Mr and Mrs Bancroft (again!) and Mrs Louise Jopling, the painter, Apparently 'Mrs Oscar Wilde was in black. Mrs Jopling in black and white'.[33] When in June 1888 when Mrs. Arthur Stannard gave a garden party it was attended by 'Charles Wyndham, Herman Vezin, Lionel Brough, Mrs Van Booth ('Rita'), Mr and Mrs Oscar Wilde, the latter wearing a black brocade with a white moiré "Directoire" sash, and a small black bonnet". All 'interesting people', according to the report in *The Lady*.[34] At Mrs Black's party in May 1889 we are told that 'Mrs Oscar Wilde wore an aesthetic terra-cotta dress with black lace hat and poppies to match.'[35]

But sometimes these house parties involved a more formal inner performance. The theatrical entertainments provided by Lady de la Warr at her home in Grosvenor Street in 1894 spanned two days. Wilde, along with the Bancrofts (again!) and Charles Wyndham (again!) were there for a least some of the time.[36] Wilde and Constance were certainly at Mrs Walter Palmer's house in Upper Brook Street in July 1894, along with George Meredith, (again!) Mr and Mrs Charles Wyndham (again!), Violet Hunt, 'George Fleming', the journalist T. P. O'Connor. Coquelin and Réjane, French stars, then appearing on the London stage, both recited.

> The entourage was almost that of an Alma Tadema painting; masses of roses wreathed the white stair-case, glowed in clusters at all points, deep crimson roses hung in festoons about the lower part of the silver dome crowning the stairs. In the hall the Hungarian – or rather one of the many kinds of Hungarian bands – discoursed their wild native music in fashion, alternately fierce and pathetic. The hostess herself, who is still in mourning, wore black, relieved with white lisse and exquisite diamonds. She has the rare distinction of being able to ensure at her house the presence of Mr. George Meredith, a literary lion, who is seldom to be persuaded from his books and his Surrey home. The novelist's pretty daughter, Miss Marie Meredith, was, of course, present, and attended by her fiancé, Mr. Henry Sturgis, brother of the well-known writer. After the manner of season crushes, it was difficult to recognise one's friends, but one caught glimpses of many an interesting face, Lady Arabella Romilly looked handsome in pale pink, Mrs. Charles Webb wore pale French grey, which suited her delicate colours to perfection; a "Criterion" party included Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wyndham and Miss Mary Moore, who was in simple white satin with bunches of deep pink roses. Two writers of the fin de siècle order, Miss Violet Hunt and Mr. Anthony Hope, carried on an animated conversation, and close by was Miss Fletcher, otherwise George Fleming, author of "Miss Lessingham," wearing a gown of pale yellow brocade. One of the loveliest people present was Lady Bloomfield whose dark Irish beauty was admirably set off by a gown of pink and white old French brocade, of which the bodice was veiled in rose-pink chiffon of a deeper shade. Miss Palmer's pretty sister, Mrs Brackenbury, wore white, and Miss Severs, turquoise blue. Among others I noticed Mrs. T.P. O'Connor, Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Wilde, Mr. Sidney Colvin, Mr. C.H.Hall, Mr. and Mrs. George Simmonds, Mr. and Mrs Ian Robertson, Lady Pollock, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Lewis and Colonel Colville. M. Coquelin (*cadet* be it understood) held his hearers entranced by a series of light and humorous recitations. One of the chief points of his power is his immensely varied facial expression. To hear him is not enough; the face is a wonderful study. The arrival of Madame Réjane during the evening caused considerable stir, and of the two pieces she selected, the one entitled "Hypnotisme" gave her, perhaps, the fullest opportunity for the display of her wonderful voice and gift of humour. As the throng began to thin a little, it was possible to enjoy the delightful songs which followed the recitations. These were sung by Miss. McPherson, who accompanied herself, and proved herself in good

voice on lyrics by Maude White, Bohm and other composers.'[37]

This is not so very different from the setting for Wilde's play, *An Ideal Husband*, in which Lady Chiltern presides over a brilliantly lit room full of guests. 'Over the well of the staircase hangs a great chandelier with wax lights, which illumine a large eighteenth century French tapestry – representing the Triumph of Love, from a design by Boucher – that is stretched on the stair-case wall... the sound of a string quartette is faintly heard'.[38] If we find ourselves writing too easily about Wilde's London as a mere 'fantasy' of upper-class life we might remember perhaps the scale and opulence of Mrs Palmer's party.

And, although there was no precisely pre-ordained pattern or sequence, as in a well-rehearsed and frequently repeated work of theatre there were times when the theatricality of such occasions was directly acknowledged, as when the two young actors, Norman Forbes-Robertson and George Alexander, both friends of Wilde, are said at one of Louise Jopling's 'Art Homes's to 'play the *jeune premier* as well in a drawing-room as on the stage.'[39]

The events I have been considering would seem to dissolve the difference between the theatrical occasion and 'everyday life' – yet they remain special and they are most certainly not for 'everybody', because by no means is 'everybody' invited to them. Nor are they 'theatre' in the sense that the performative elements they undoubtedly contained were not their avowed aim and primary justification.

So, what links these events that are and are not like tableaux, are and are not like theatre? That are neither strictly work nor strictly play? I would suggest that the clue lies with their status as 'celebrations', intending the word in a rather precise sense. If we turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary* we find that the words 'celebrate', 'celebration' and 'celebrity' are closely connected, in fact they share the same Latin root. The verb 'to celebrate' seems to originate in connection with religious ceremony, a connection it still retains, as in 'to celebrate' the Christian mass or the marriage service, and it means 'to perform with due rites'. The noun, a 'celebration', also carries that meaning but it can be extended to Saint's Days and, a crucial shift,

to 'festivities', while a 'celebrated person' is, of course, a famous one. 'Celebrity' also once referred to religious rites and meant to conduct with pomp and solemnity though that meaning is long obsolete. More commonly 'celebrity' was, until the nineteenth century and beyond, a 'condition of being much extolled or talked about', in short to be famous. But, in the course of the nineteenth century a shift took place, a new meaning crept in, and 'celebrity' came to refer not to a condition but to a person, something one was, a 'celebrity', a 'public character'.

The events I have been describing are then the 'celebrations' (of work well done, or something achieved, a life-style, a 'home') that both depend upon and produce 'celebrities'. This sets them apart from other 'celebrations' (domestic, totally private, such a family birthday parties) because they are unashamedly selective. And, significantly, they develop in age of increasing professionalization for workers in what we now call the 'creative industries'. There were plans afoot for a National Association of Journalists and a School of Journalism in the 1890s,[40] though we have no record of Wilde showing any interest in either. The National Union of Journalists was eventually founded in 1907. However, in 1887 Wilde was pleased to become a Fellow of the Society of Authors which had been founded in 1884. The appearance of professional organisation is testimony to increased power and increased vulnerability. To be a writer or actor in this climate is, perhaps, to gain increased rewards and then to risk losing them or having them withheld. These are, in short, the circumstances of modern capitalist employment and work. The celebrations I have been considering are in effect safety valves, 'secular rituals', which appear to serve a ritualistic function. And yet, although they may have sometimes involved quite heavy expenditure, they were nonetheless considered good investments. Was 'business' ever far way, one wonders?

Above all, perhaps, it gave a writer a chance to make an appearance. The word often adopted at the time to describe these celebratory events was, aptly enough, a 'crush'. (It appears in *Dorian Gray*). To be caught up in a crush was a kind of challenge, How to make sure that you were singled out in the melée? How to create a bit of a space round you? Not to be part of the crush? How not to be a crushing bore? Oscar Wilde who was completely at home in the crush obviously knew how

to avoid the traps. He responded to those occasions when the work is achieved to such an extent that it can be represented as pleasure (and not as fatigue, risk, sweat). This is the mood where Wilde the public figure was most at home – which, of course, links him with the fantasy aristocrats in his plays and fictions who never work at all. At such times he could pretend, along with others, that work and play were one.

notes

1 'Dress at the Private View at the Grosvenor Gallery', *The Queen*, 2 May 1885.

2 'The Private View of the Grosvenor Gallery', *The Lady*, 7 May 1887.

3 *The Court and Society Review*, 5 January 1887.

4 See Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian public* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986) and Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession: writing and the culture industry in the late nineteenth century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Also see Peter Raby, 'Wilde: The Remarkable Rocket' in *Theatre and Celebrity, 1660-2000* eds. by Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 31-47.

5 *The World*, 4 May and 25 May 1887.

6 *The World*, 30 November, 1887.

7 'Mr. Oscar Wilde on Woman's Dress', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 14 October 1884.

8 Report of a lecture on dress in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 2 October 1884.

9 'More Radical Ideas upon Dress Reform', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 November 1884.

10 'More Radical Ideas upon Dress Reform', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 November 1884. Ann Hollander believes that 'It is the inner theater that is costumed by the choice of clothes, and this is not always under conscious management. The public may not always be intended, much less able, to get the picture. Control of sensory events is the essence of theater, and a good deal of significant dressing is obviously done with a very incomplete knowledge or control of the outward and inward effects.' (*Seeing Through Clothes*, New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 451-2. But Hollander's position has been questioned in turn by the feminist cultural historian Elizabeth Wilson who believes that one's choice of what to wear is more of an expression of desire, ambition and personal fantasy, of what one would like to be rather than what one actually is, what Hollander calls one's 'inner theatre'. In which case the 'language' of clothes is not descriptive so much as, in Bartheian terms, an endless chain of signifiers. Retrospectively, where would we place Oscar Wilde in this debate? On the one hand, he is adamant in his early theoretical statements that clothes must be practical, minister to everyday needs; on the other, he suits his dress to the occasion – although, as with the examples I have given, the occasion itself is often exceptional. He can dress up because everybody else is doing so - though to a lesser extent – and women rather than men. At such times dress becomes utopian. Clothes for Wilde are like language precisely because they permit a kind of creative lying. And lying, as we know from the famous dialogue, was in danger of becoming a lost art. See Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, New Edition (London and New York, I.B.Tauris, 2003).

11 *The World*, 10 May 1882.

12 Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake. Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 164, mentions Whistler's *The White Girl*.

13 See Margaret F. Macdonald, Susan Grace Galassi & Aileen Ribeiro, with Patricia de Montfort (eds), *Whistler, Women, & Fashion* (New York: The Frick Collection in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2003), esp. 30 and 95. Also see David Park Curry, 'Total Control: Whistler at an Exhibition', *Studies in the History of Art*, 19 (1987:69).

14 Prettejohn, 184.

15 Macdonald et al, 9.

16 Macdonald et al, 9.

17 'Tea-Table Talk', *The World*, 28 April, 1886.

18 W.B.Yeats, *Autobiographies*, (London: Macmillan, 1966), 134-5.

19 *The Lady's World*, August 1887.

20 *The Lady*, 4 June 1885.

21 *Rainbow-Music. The Philosophy of Harmony in Colour-Grouping* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1886), 17: 'These dominant hues are golden pink (or aurora), amethyst fading to pearl-grey, sea-green (aqua-marine), all melting in tone like the blushing dawn reflected in a calm sea. There are three lattice-windows of quaint but simple construction, all slightly differing; but, as it is now evening, we see them closely curtained with aurora-colour stain of the same tint as that on the walls. On these walls are painted and on these curtains are embroidered many an iris in delicate tint and fantastic form. Their fluttering heads and waving reeds bend thither and thither, as it swayed by contending breezes; while others lie stricken on the ground, as if by a passing storm; their flowers vary in every tint of amethysts, pearl-grey, blue, pink, and white, and the reeds in aqua-marine and every tint of sea-green.... Here and there crystal dew-drop glistens on a petal; here and there one stands out in bold relief, shining in *Iris* tints and bathed in light; and again....' Lady Archibald also invokes 'Japanese' styles.

22 MacDonald et al, 10.

23 Hollander, xi.

24 Hollander, 311.

25 The French novelist Honoré de Balzac is frequently evoked in descriptions of dress (and of

décor, as with Lady Archibald's red room).

26 Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (London: Cape, 1985), 262.

27 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 29 May 1886.

28 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 July 1885.

29 *The World*, 23 September, 1885.

30 *The World*, 30 December 1885.

31 *The Lady*, 3 January 1895.

32 Willmar Sauter, *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 10.

33 *The Lady*, 22 April 1886.

34 *The Lady*, 5 July 1888.

35 *The Lady*, 30 May 1889.

36 *The Lady*, 15 February 1894.

37 *The Lady*, 12 July 1894.

38 *An Ideal Husband*, Act. 1, *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994), 515.

39 *The Lady's World*, August 1887.

40 See Laurel Brake, *Print in Transition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 77.