

Wilde about Nietzsche

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Not a lot of people know this, but the sainted Oscar Wilde and the sinner Friedrich Nietzsche used to be terrible twins, separated at birth.¹ Their critiques of contemporary morality and facility for aphoristic observations made them irreverent thorns in the sanctimonious sides of late-nineteenth century society and scholarship. So much so, Thomas Mann once noted ‘almost with chagrin, on how many of Nietzsche’s aphorisms might have been expressed by Wilde and how many of Wilde’s by Nietzsche’.² Whatever else is said about them – and much has been said of both – they were brilliant scholars, brilliant writers, brilliant critics, brilliantly funny and, although both came to ignominious ends, they have risen from the dead, triumphant.³

But whereas Freddy figures prominently in *Canonical Authors in Consumption Theory*,⁴ a must-read anthology of key thinkers for would be consumer researchers, Oscar doesn’t warrant a mention. Nor is he included in the list of second-string scholars set to feature in the follow-up volume, if and when it appears.⁵ That is a shame, we believe. Actually, it is more than a shame; it is a serious oversight. Oscar has much to teach CCT, not least how to reach out to a vast audience. Before his precipitous fall, Wilde was feted by Victorian society as a wit, a dandy, a bon viveur, a playwright of genius and a bestselling author of children’s fairy tales, who was once lionised as the new Andersen.⁶ If storytelling is the sine qua non of contemporary consumer research and narrative transportation our aim, who better to turn to than Oscar.

Consider, for example, the third of his four essays in *Intentions*, Wilde’s characteristically iconoclastic book on literary criticism.⁷ In ‘The Artist as Critic’, Oscar presents a dialogue in which ‘Gilbert’ convinces a reluctant ‘Ernest’ that criticism is the superior part of creation, arguing that the critic must not be fair, rational, and sincere, but rather possessed of ‘a temperament exquisitely susceptible to beauty’.⁸ It’s a sentiment which intimates that the current state of consumer culture criticism, with its emphasis on theoretical rigour and sincerity of interpretation, may be limiting our capacity for genuine insight. Consumer researchers, it suggests -- particularly within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) -- have become too much like Ernest, earnestly seeking fair, rational, and sincere interpretations, plodding out, for instance, well-trodden versions of the same old methods sections⁹ (f/n Don’t forget to cite Spriggle 1994) that have been presented thousands of times before. Instead, we espouse Wilde’s vision of the critic as artist, where criticism becomes ‘a new kind of creation’, a work of art in itself.¹⁰

Drawing inspiration from Wilde’s dialectical exploration, we believe consumer researchers should embrace their role as cultural critics while acknowledging the creative and potentially irrational dimensions of their analytical work. Our perspective represents a continuation of humanistic inquiry in consumer research and finds its contemporary home in the present journal.¹¹ Granted, several other journals, most notably the *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Marketing Theory* and *Consumption Markets and Culture*, have shown admirable willingness to embrace ‘readable radical research’, but not with the same single-

mindedness as JCB.¹² Most marketing journals, frankly, remain firmly-rooted in the business of showcasing theory as cultural capital to be displayed and admired. JCB, by contrast, celebrates artistic depth. It does not indulge in what Hage, following Freud, aptly describes as the ‘narcissism of small differences’ that characterises contributing to the theoretical marketplace.¹³ In doing so, JCB offers an alternative to the theoretical fetishism that plagues our field.

Our beliefs thereby build on longstanding debates about whether marketing and consumer research should be treated as art or science,¹⁴ while embracing recent methodological innovations that foreground creative approaches to understanding consumption.¹⁵ Following Wilde’s insistence that ‘each mode of criticism is, in its highest development, simply a mood’,¹⁶ we seek a form of consumer research that privileges aesthetic sensibility over theoretical elaboration, personality over objectivity and creative vision over methodological orthodoxy.

Accordingly, we proffer three contentions drawn from Wilde’s dialogue. First, that effective cultural criticism in consumer research requires not methodological rigour but rather an ‘exquisitely susceptible’ temperament – the ability to see and articulate beauty or ugliness in consumer culture. Second, that Wilde’s celebration of bias and individual perspective should be embraced and, analogously, that consumer researchers should abandon the pretence of objectivity and instead cultivate their prejudices as essential elements of cultural insight.¹⁶ Finally, we suggest that by liberating ourselves from the constraints of balanced interpretation, consumer research might achieve what Wilde terms ‘the highest criticism’, a form of creative expression that transcends its source material.¹⁷

Noting important emerging work in consumer research, such as Södergren *et al.*’s recent piece on Cubist scholarship,¹⁸ we further believe that artistic academics can embrace Wilde’s vision of criticism as creative art while still contributing meaningful insights to our understanding of consumer culture. Such examples show how researchers are breaking free from the constraints of theoretical frameworks and methodological orthodoxy to craft what will come to be seen as evocative and impactful cultural criticism.¹⁹

Our reconceptualization of the consumer researcher as artist-critic has important implications for how we approach the study of consumer culture. It suggests that our most valuable contributions may come not from building elaborate theoretical frameworks or seeking objective truths, but from cultivating what Wilde calls ‘the critical spirit’,²⁰ which is a creative, subjective, and even prejudiced approach to understanding consumption phenomena. The emergence of outlets like JCB that welcome such approaches signals an exciting new direction in consumer research – one that privileges artistic expression and cultural insight over theoretical elaboration.

It’s a direction, incidentally, that’s informing critical management studies, where an ironic attitude – as opposed to earnest endeavour – is seen as a means of escaping the stultifying orthodoxy of critical commentary.²¹ When it comes to dispelling an earnest ethos, who better to than Oscar Wilde, whose *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the epitome of the playful playwrights’ art.²²

Will we, in years to come, regard assemblages in the way that Wilde’s immortal Lady Bracknell treated handbags? ‘An assemblage?’ If only.

Notes

1. By ten years, admittedly (1844/1854). But were united in death (1900/1900). Freddy's mental collapse, incidentally, coincided with Oscar's rise to fame. Spooky!
2. Ellmann, *Critical Writings*.
3. This hardly needs a citation. It's a fact.
4. Askegaard and Heilbrunn, *Canonical Authors*; Fitchett, 'Why bother'.
5. Their list of thinkers-to-come comprises Zigmunt Bauman, Jacques Derrida, Emile Durkheim, Anthony Giddens, Erving Goffman, Marshall McLuhan, Georg Simmel, Werner Sombart and Thorstein Veblen. Oh, and then as an afterthought, the editors add Aristotle, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, Bernard de Mandeville, Thomas Hobbs, Giorgio Agamben and René Girard. Nor do they forget Epicure, John Rawls, Martha Nussbaum 'and others'. Wonder if Wilde is one of the others. We doubt it.
6. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 282.
7. Wilde, *Intentions*.
8. Wilde, 'Artist as critic'.
9. Failure to cite Spiggle (1994) is fatal.
10. Wilde, 'Artist as critic', 368.
11. Hirschman, 'Humanistic inquiry'.
12. We live in hope, though.
13. Hage, 'Towards an ethics'.
14. Brown, 'Art or science'.
15. Coffin and Hill, 'Introduction'; Patterson and Larson, 'Listening to consumption'.
16. Wilde, 'Artist as critic', 390.
17. Brown and Patterson, 'Me-search? Search me!'
18. Wilde, 'Artist as critic', 369.
19. Södergren et al, 'Cubist consumer research'.
20. Schroeder, 'The artist'.
21. Wilde, 'Artist and critic', 403.

22. Alvesson and Spicer, 'Critical management studies'.

23. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 404-406.

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