Paul Fortunato. ***Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde.*** London: Routledge, 207. 162p.

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"Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body." Paul Fortunato might have positioned this quote by Terry Eagleton, which appears in the conclusion of *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde*, at the beginning of a book which, as Fortunato himself explains, follows the trajectory of a "new phase in Wilde studies" that involves, among other things, a re-imagining of the body as a work of art (144). Fortunato points out that Wilde's aestheticism is concerned with the relationship between body and identity, not in an abstract or idealistic way, but in a way that finds both concepts rooted in material culture—particularly that of consumerism, popular periodicals with mass circulation, and fashion. The significance of Fortunato's book to Wilde studies is its argument for a revision of Wilde's aestheticism to include his embracing of and participation in the culture industry in numerous ways: as a journalist of popular and women's magazines; in his friendships with and circulation in the salons of famous actresses, pre-Raphaelite artists, and female aesthetes; in his own manner of self-apparel; and, in the production and promotion of his own literary work, especially his plays.

From re-examining Wilde through the above-mentioned lenses, Fortunato identifies what he calls Wilde's "consumer modernism," which distinguishes Wilde from other modernists because of its emergence from, reliance upon and celebration of forms of popular, rather than high, culture. In addition to focusing on his own self-image, Wilde's brand of consumer modernism focuses predominantly on the [self] appareled woman—and therefore, on female identity—as aesthetic object that exists not as object of the male gaze, but more importantly as self-created "superficial ornament" and "ephemeral public image" (ix), capable, according to Fortunato, of disrupting Western hegemonies by "theorizing through categories that had previously been marginalized: the superficial, the fashionable, 'Oriental,' the ornamental, the bodily" (143). Put a different way, Wilde's consumer modernism, according to Fortunato, "elevates the marginalized elements—things gendered feminine, considered as bodily rather than rational, and often marked as Oriental—in order to de-center the Western, rationalist, masculinist subject. [Wilde] offers a conception of art that is not anti-Western but otherwise-than-Western" (ix). In linking Wilde's aesthetic concerns to consumerism and fashion at the end of the nineteenth century, the women writers who primarily wrote about it in popular magazines, and the women actresses who embodied the pre-Raphaelite aesthetics that rejected Victorian restrictions on the ways that women should dress (corseted), appear in

public (escorted) and behave (demurely), Fotunato links Wilde with a certain class of women who, arguably, may have influenced a certain trajectory of First Wave Feminism in aesthetics and art. Wilde's own interest in women and women's issues relating to fashion and public identity, according to Fortunato, illustrates Wilde's importance to materialist and feminist readings of late nineteenth-century culture, albeit to the narrow concerns of upper middle-class, white, urban women.

In setting the parameters for proposing a new understanding of Oscar Wilde as a modernist figure, Fortunato situates Wilde within sociological, economic, and cultural contexts involving mass and popular culture in turn of the century Great Britain, namely the English periodical press, the theater, fashion, and consumerism. By placing Wilde within these contexts, Fortunato reveals a greater complexity in a literary figure commonly regarded as an aesthetic heir of Walter Pater, as a "dandy" and proponent of fin-de-siècle decadence in both persona and art, and as a figure of tragedy resulting from the public scandal, defamation, and criminalization of homosexuality in turn of the century Britain. Fortunato nods his head to these readings of Wilde and his œuvre; however, he is interested in proposing not an alternative understanding of Wilde, but a more complex and complete way to read what we know about Wilde. Fortunato traces a different trajectory of influence that broadens Wilde's aesthetic inheritance by carefully chronicling the impact of materialist and feminine aspects of mass culture, such as female consumption, the emergence of the New Woman, and the "icon of the woman of fashion" upon his work (vii). In serving this end, Fortunato has carefully managed the primary and secondary source evidence supporting his reading of Wilde as consumer modernist, and has judiciously chosen and positioned references to excerpts written by Wilde (and also by female aesthetes such as Rosamund Marriott Watson, who wrote under the pseudonym of Graham R. Tomson) for *The Pall Mall Gazette* and *Woman's World*, letters penned by Wilde and his contemporaries, and references to and excepts from Wilde's plays and critical essays. Attention to the chronology of Wilde's work allows Fortunato to locate the emergence of Wilde's consumer modernism in *Woman's World* (38).

The trajectory of Fortunato's identification and discussion of Wilde's consumer modernism begins by locating Wilde in consumer culture, and culminates in a discussion of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which can be regarded as an exemplum of the merging of consumer culture and art, as well as an example of art as consumer culture. Following Fortunato's lead, one could argue that Wilde's production simultaneously exists as a "consumer culture product" and as evidence of a "foundational moment in modernist aesthetics" in which Wilde combines fashion, class, "surface, image, and ritual" (viii-ix). In Chapter One, "Background: Wilde's Social Circles and Consumer Culture," Fortunato introduces the close relationship between the aesthetes (the souls),

art, fashion and theater. Chapters Two and Three focus on Wilde's relationship to popular consumer culture, specifically his work as a journalist for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Woman's World*. In Chapter Four, "Philosophy with a Needle and Thread: The Aesthetics of Fashion in Baudelaire, Wilde, and Tomson/Watson," Fortunato argues that Wilde brought Baudelaire's "proto-modernist ideas into contact with those of early female aesthetes like M.E. Haweis…brought a discourse that was 'authoritative' in the eyes of many critics (Baudelaire) into contact with a less authoritative discourse (that of Haweis)" (61), the result of which culminated in a "commingling of high and mass culture" (vii). Collectively, as Fortunato points out, "Baudelaire, Wilde, and the female aesthetes provide a developed theoretical framework for an aesthetics of fashion…they assert that art *needs* the material, commercial world" (67). Chapter Five is concerned with the production, performance and reception of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and connects the play to fashion and Wilde's modernist aesthetics. Chapter Six concerns the central character of the play, Mrs. Erlynne, who exemplifies the importance of women's [appareled] bodies and feminine identity to Wilde's aestheticism and consumer modernism, as well as evidence of feminist proclivities in Wilde's work.

One of the final points that Fortunato makes about fashion and women's agency could perhaps be more complexly situated. Interpreting Wilde's portrayal of Mrs. Erlynne as evidence that women use fashion and clothing to create their own identities indeed shows that women can and often do exercise a certain degree of agency within capitalist institutions like fashion. What remains to be seen is whether or not this agency enables women to disrupt or refute masculinist notions of beauty and femininity, resist or reconfigure social mediation of female bodies and/or gender roles, or critique women's social and sexual oppression. In the case of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Mrs. Erlynne uses fashion and performance to create a spectacular façade that masks her "true" identity and saves her daughter's marriage; fashion, consumer rituals, and acquisitive materialism allow Mrs. Erlynne to discover "her own capacity to forge powerful bonds with her daughter" and to "discover a new role for herself, one that she had not anticipated" (137). Despite the fact that Mrs. Erlynne is the heroine of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, given the class interests of the play, any feminist reading would certainly have to be limited to women of a particular class position who possess a certain amount of economic and cultural capital.

Much scholarship problematizing the already complicated argument about female agency in fashion and the fashion industry has emerged over the past twenty years. The debate about whether and when women are empowered by fashion and act as agents in creating their own identities, or whether fashion merely inculcates women to become, through imitation, complicit in their commodification as mass-

produced images, has been engaged by theorists of women and fashion, women and shopping, and women in public, including Sandra Bartky, Joanne Entwistle, Rachel Bowlby, Elizabeth Wilson, Janet Wolf, and Deborah Parsons. Referencing this recent work, in conjunction with the references Fortunato makes to the work of Iris Young, would even better support locating incipient feminism in Wilde's writing and would strengthen his claim that Wilde's focus on the self-creating woman is feminist (or, perhaps proto-feminist). None the less, this excellent reinterpretation of Oscar Wilde's aesthetic in relation to consumer and mass culture most definitely rejuvenates Wilde studies with a new trajectory of exploration not only for literary critics, but also for critics and researchers who study fashion, art and consumer culture from the purviews of economics, history, feminism, and sociology. ❊