

MARZO 2024, NUMERO IV.2

IOWS

THE ITALIAN OSCAR WILDE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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Style Matters. Oscar Wilde and Beyond

An interview with Darcy Sullivan

BY PIERPAOLO MARTINO

Pierpaolo Martino: Darcy can you tell us something about your background? When did you move from California to England and why?

Darcy Sullivan: I grew up around Los Angeles and studied literature at UCLA. My career has been in marketing and PR, but my real interests have always been literature, horror films, comics and clothes. As a freelance writer, I have written for diverse publications, from *The Chap* to *Weird Fiction Review*!

My wife is English and we met in 1985. She moved to the US shortly after that, and we raised two children in San Francisco. We moved back to the UK in 2010.

Darcy you are the perfect embodiment of Salman Rushdie's concept of "translated man", that is someone who is translated across cultures. As Rushdie observes in his seminal essay *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) "it is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately that something can also be gained", the outcome of this process of translation is indeed the double nature of the artist who is both an insider and outsider, who can see and analyze European and American realities through a very rich and complex perspective.

Like many writers, I have always felt more of an outsider than an insider! In this respect, I feel I did not lose as much as others might by moving countries. In fact, it feels more natural to be an actual outsider in a foreign culture, as opposed to wondering why one is an outsider in the very place where they grew up.

Wilde himself was a very liminal character. Moving in between different worlds. When did you fall in love with Oscar?



Darcy Sullivan is an incredibly multi-talented artist and researcher. Born in California, he moved to the UK in 2010. A long-time Wildean enthusiast and fan, he joined the committee of the British Oscar Wilde Society and became their Press Officer. A Dandy and a lover of beauty, Darcy seems to embrace Wilde's fascination with the idea of being a work of art oneself. As Wilde he also believes in the importance of establishing a fruitful dialogue between the High and the Low, Art and the marketplace; hence his involvement in the world of comics and popular music. We met him last November in London at Goldsmiths College.

Many people cite a "Eureka!" moment when they first came across Wilde, but I can't remember. I do remember that by the time I graduated university I had read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and a seminal biography of Wilde by Hesketh Pearson. I also recall that I had a large poster of Oscar in my first apartment in L.A. after university, when I was living in what is known as the 'Miracle Mile' (there is an apocalyptic cult film by that name, which takes

place around the area and features its most notable landmark, the La Brea Tar Pits).

Why was I attracted to Oscar? I have always been interested in dandies, people who dressed flamboyantly, and androgynous people such as David Sylvian, Quentin Crisp and Marc Bolan. That sounds superficial, but even such a superficial aspect can draw you into an engagement with serious work, such as Wilde's. And any exposure to Wilde brings you into contact with his wit, which I find thrilling, as I find the writing of, say, Mark Twain, Tom Wolfe or Kingsley Amis.

Is there a work by Oscar who has a specific relevance for you?

That would have to be *The Picture of Dorian Gray*! From the plot – which created a new myth, the ageless person and the picture in the attic – to the *bon mots* of Lord Henry Wotton, I love this book. It overlaps with my interest in the genre known as weird fiction. I enjoy the film versions of it, and the first thing I ever wrote for the Oscar Wilde Society was a critical article on the many versions of it in comic books. Ten years ago I started a Facebook page called The Pictures of Dorian Gray, originally presenting 100 different published covers for the book and rating them; when I'd finished I just started posting various items about Dorian Gray. The page has about 1,600 followers now and you can find it on facebook.com/pixofdoriangray.

When did you join the OWS? You have always been their Press Officer?

I joined the Oscar Wilde Society about 10 years ago, after we moved to London. I had discovered them while researching *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and ordering all the issues of their peer-reviewed journal, *The Wildean*, with articles on that book. I did not imagine, of course, that I would soon be the assistant editor, working with Robert Whelan, the editor and deputy chairman of the Society. I became pretty involved with the Society, such that I was asked to join the committee, and with my career in marketing and PR becoming the first Press Officer was a good fit.

Why do you think Wilde matters now? Why, as you wrote in the OWS newsletter, is Oscar Wilde so popular today and such a touchpoint for filmmakers, musicians and other artists?

Oscar Wilde matters, as any great writer does, because of his works. But he has a particularly current persona, and that I think is down to three things. First, he did not so much present ideas as challenge ideas – that is the secret to the popularity of his paradoxes and his plays, especially *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The second half of the 20th century was all about challenging authority, challenging preconceptions, challenging the status quo, and Oscar resonates with this. Second, he manufactured his public persona more than anyone of his era, and that is something that always resonates with the young. Third, he was a master of short-form humor. Other authors have been as funny, even more so, but Oscar worked with a few words in a Twitter-esque fashion.

Like Oscar, you are always incredibly elegant. How would you define style?

Hah! Well, thank you! Style is personal expression, which can be consciously considered and constructed or completely unconscious. Everybody has their own style, but what we mean when we talk about style is *differentiated* style. This is completely at odds with Beau Brummell, who said, "If John Bull turns around to look at you, you are not well-dressed; but either too stiff, too tight, or too fashionable." To Brummell, elegance and indeed dandyism meant balance and perfection, not looking extraordinary or unusual. I think that sounds rather boring, don't you? I prefer the people whose style *does* make you look, like Iris Apfel or Sebastian Horsley. I am fascinated by those male subcultures that push fashionable looks to the extreme, such as the Restoration fops, the French *incroyables* and the Italian *gagas*.

Can you tell us something about your work and research on comics and graphic novels?

I started reading comics when I was six years old, and unlike most people I never grew out of

it. I started with Marvel Comics and eventually moved into alternative comics. For several years in the 1980s and 1990s I was a regular writer for *The Comics Journal*, where I wrote reviews and essays and also did in-depth interviews with comics authors, including Charles Burns, Daniel Clowes, the Hernandez Brothers and Richard Sala. I have also interviewed such classic creators as Gil Kane and Mike Mignola.

In 1990 I visited Paris and discovered the *bandes dessinées*! This was a revelation and I started collecting works by the *ligne claire* school of artists such as Daniel Torres and Yves Chaland. While American comics were dominated by just a few genres until fairly recently, and as such were viewed as juvenile, the French, Belgians, Italians and others had comics for all tastes and ages. I would consider myself an expert on American superhero and horror comics, but more of an aficionado of the European artists.

And what about Wilde in the graphic novels world?

Oscar is very well-represented in the world of graphic novels. There are several versions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the best by far being by Enrique Corominas. There are adaptations of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, of *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*, and of his fairy stories, the best here being those by P. Craig Russell, an American comic artist who started with superheroes for Marvel Comics and then followed his love of fine art and in particular art nouveau to produce adaptations of operas, including Wilde's *Salome*. Oscar himself makes appearances in comics as well, for instance in Dave Sim's *Cerebus*. Here I would point people to *La Divina Comedia de Oscar Wilde* by Javier de Isusi, which is a serious and wonderfully executed graphic novel of Wilde's life, published in 2019.

Link to the British **Oscar Wilde Society**: oscarwildesociety.co.uk

Darcy thanks so much on behalf of IOWS and thanks about your interest in our activities! Something about your future projects?

For the Oscar Wilde Society, I am reviewing the fantastic one-woman production of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, produced by the Sidney Theatre Company and starring Sarah Snook, which is on a limited run in London. I am also assisting with the production of the Society's next book, a compilation of articles from *The Woman's World*, the magazine Wilde edited before writing his famous plays.

I am also on the committee of the Whistler Society, and am starting to plan an event where James Whistler will "debate" Oscar Wilde, based on their frequent exchanges, which started politely but became quite antagonistic over time. I have played Whistler many times now for the Whistler Society, as well as in a play about Wilde — now I need to find someone to play Oscar.

As a member of the British Association of Decadence Studies, I am going to give an introduction to a showing of Luca Guadagnino's *Suspiria*, which is a terrific film. Everybody loves Argento's original, and so do I, but this reimagining took the concept in a very different direction.

And on a completely different note, I write and record country music inspired by the weird fiction of H.P. Lovecraft! You can find The Arkham Hillbilly on Bandcamp, YouTube and Facebook. I call it eldritch country music. There has been a lot of Lovecraft-themed heavy metal and hard rock, but never a mixture of Lovecraft and country music — it is a gap that did not need to be filled, but I have filled it anyway!

Pierpaolo Martino è professore associato di letteratura inglese presso l'Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro. I suoi ambiti di ricerca includono i Wilde Studies, il Modernismo, gli studi culturali, le letterature postcoloniali e i rapporti tra letteratura e musica. È autore di *Mark the Music. The Language of Music in English Literature from Shakespeare to Salman Rushdie* (2012), e di *Wilde Now. Performance, Celebrity and Intermediality in Oscar Wilde* (Palgrave 2023). È membro fondatore e vicepresidente della Italian Oscar Wilde Society e fa parte del comitato direttivo della collana *InCarnations: Studi e prospettive sull'Ottocento britannico* (ETS).

"I am getting rather astonishing in my Italian conversation. I believe I talk a mixture of Dante and the worst modern slang."

O. Wilde

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