

‘The supreme vice is shallowness’ – Oscar Wilde

Wilde’s martyrdom in perspective

Wilde, directed by Brian Gilbert, screenplay by Julian Mitchell

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Brian Gilbert’s *Wilde*, from a script by Julian Mitchell, with Stephen Fry in the leading role, has a certain seriousness about it. This account of Anglo-Irish poet-playwright Oscar Wilde’s trials and tribulations might prompt a spectator to wonder what all the fuss was about. But the film does not do enough to provide an answer of its own.

Gilbert’s film covers 17 or so years of Wilde’s life. It begins with a brief, amusing scene of his talk, on *The English Renaissance*, delivered underground to a group of Leadville, Colorado miners in 1882, during his successful American lecture tour. It jumps abruptly to scenes, back in England, of his courtship of Constance Lloyd (Jennifer Ehle), with whom he ultimately has two children. We witness Wilde’s first homosexual encounter, with Robert Ross (Michael Sheen), and the evolution of his relationship with Lord Alfred (“Bosie”) Douglas—the central figure in the last phase of his life. We see Douglas and Constance vie for Wilde’s love and attention.

In 1895 Wilde brings suit against the Marquess of Queensberry (Tom Wilkinson), Douglas’s monster of a father, because the latter has accused him of publicly “posing” as a homosexual. That suit fails miserably, the tables are turned, and Wilde finds himself in the dock, accused of “gross indecency.” He lies, under oath, about his relations with men, claiming that the “love that dare not speak its name” is simply the Platonic friendship between an older and a younger man. Convicted of the charge, for which there is ample evidence, he is given the maximum sentence—two years at hard labor. Upon his release he travels to the Continent where, his health and spirit broken, he dies in 1900.

The film has strengths. Fry’s performance is certainly one of them. He does a remarkable job of entering into and inhabiting Wilde’s physical appearance and manner. When one thinks of Wilde from now on, one will envision Fry. Vanessa Redgrave does an interesting turn, in a small part, as Lady Wilde, “Speranza,” Wilde’s Irish nationalist mother.

The film, while it includes the inevitable quotient of Wilde’s witticisms, places considerable emphasis on his gentleness and generosity. It stresses his feelings for his wife and children, his loyalty to friends and his bravery in the face of the legal lynching party that threatened him. It alludes, as well, to his egalitarian sentiments—without, however, making much of them.

Wilde’s persecution and suffering was a tragic event, and the film makes one feel its horror. An encounter between Oscar and Constance in prison is quite moving; his stint in prison, walking on a treadmill, quite odious.

In the end, however, it is necessary to sort out the intellectual impulses behind Gilbert’s film. It is, of course, the first major film that frankly discusses Wilde’s sexual orientation. In two previous British films, both, oddly enough, released in 1960—*Oscar Wilde* (directed by Gregory Ratoff) and *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (directed by Ken Hughes)—Robert

Morley and Peter Finch, as the persecuted writer, respectively, could merely give their presumed male lovers long, lingering looks. That *Wilde* is able to tell the real story is not a small matter. It is entirely appropriate—in reality, a democratic principle is involved—that the record be set unambiguously straight.

Stephen Fry suggested to the audience on hand for the San Francisco film festival’s presentation of *Wilde* that the twentieth century and its political efforts had been largely “discredited” and that, according to Wilde, “art leads the way to human happiness” and, in fact, represents a “radical alternative.”

I don’t happen to agree with Fry’s argument, for in offering art as an alternative to politics, he treats the two spheres as if they lead quite separate existences. He forgot to mention that it is not only politics that has been discredited in many eyes, but so has art as a serious endeavor. The decline in both the political and cultural levels is part of a unified historical process, bound up with some of the difficulties of our age. But, nonetheless, Fry’s comment represents an argument, a perspective, and one that might prove fruitful as the basis of an artistic work. Unfortunately, it is not truly the basis of the film in which he stars. The film identifies Wilde with aestheticism, but without seriously taking on the historical issues involved. Aestheticism is reduced to attractive decor and fashionable clothes.

Frankly, although the film tips its hat in all sorts of directions, its central concern is with Wilde’s sexuality. And, while acknowledging that this is a legitimate issue, one feels obliged to ask: was his sexual activity—even if one were to draw the narrow conclusion that his persecution involved no other question—the critical feature of his life? Is it the only, or the primary reason one remembers him? In answering yes to this question, one would be doing a severe injustice to a considerable body of artistic and critical work.

But that is precisely what the makers of *Wilde*, perhaps unwittingly, have done. This is the product, in the most general sense, of two interconnected social processes: on the one hand, the systematic attack on radical and socialist ideas, so that Wilde’s politically oppositional—almost anarchist—notions are de-emphasized in the film; on the other, the corresponding general ascendancy of ethnic, racial, sexual politics, so that Wilde’s sexual identity becomes all, or nearly all.

Dramatically, this has an odd ripple effect. Aware perhaps of their agenda, but not able to intellectually counter it, the film’s makers overcompensate, in fact, and turn the women in the film into icons. Jennifer Ehle, a fine actress, has little to do but appear long-suffering; the film paints her character in unrealistically flattering colors. As portrayed by Jude Law, on the other hand, “Bosie” Douglas is relentlessly spoiled, self-absorbed and cruel. Did he have no endearing qualities, besides his good looks? Why was Wilde interested in him? And the film’s treatment

of the Marquess of Queensberry is the most one-dimensional of all. He is a reactionary psychopath, frothing at the mouth, from the first moment we see him to the last. What is the point in portraying human beings in this manner? Whom does it convince?

The film, in general, spells everything out in a manner that leaves little to the imagination. A conversation in front of a painting with a beautiful young man about youth, aging and beauty is sufficient, we are led and expected to believe, to prompt Wilde to pen *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This kind of reductionism, with its elimination of ambiguity, chaos and contradictoriness—and fun—from life, does not serve anyone's interests.

The real problem with *Wilde* is that, although it is intelligent and observant, it is not animated by any great ideas, unlike its subject.

We have written about these issues before. Wilde, it seems to me, is a serious intellectual figure. He stood for the principles of creativity and genuine individualism in opposition to the general spirit of his age and to what he described as “the heavy, cumbrous, blind mechanical forces of Society.” He believed strongly in the power of human thought to shape art, society and nature. In *De Profundis*, Wilde wrote about Christ, “He felt that life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped into any form was death.” No doubt Wilde would have liked these words applied to his own attitude to life.

Wilde insisted that art had its own independent life, that it was “not necessarily realistic in an age of realism, nor spiritual in an age of faith. So far from being the creation of its time, it is usually in direct opposition to it, and the only history that it preserves for us is the history of its own progress.” The important notion here, once one separates it from its idealist integument, that human beings are capable of reflecting upon their immediate surroundings and going beyond them, rejecting them, is lost, alas, on the creators of *Wilde*. Not only does their film reflect very much dominant moods and thinking, they have managed to create a character largely at home, except apparently for the unfortunate happenstance of his sexual preferences, in his age. Oscar Wilde, a common sensical, down-to-earth, rather earnest, late Victorian, “Man of His Times”! This is an irony that needs a *Wilde* to be fully appreciated.

Of course it comes as absolutely no surprise that the one major work of Wilde's never referred to in the film is his essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. This is not the result of a conspiracy; rather, it would simply seem a given in the circles of people out of which this film emerges that such a work is an irrelevancy, that it has been “discredited” by the course of events in the twentieth century, to use Fry's word.

Not that one ought to paint *Wilde* as some sort of socialist militant ready to man the barricades. But his opposition to the existing social order was genuine and intellectually worked out. Anyone who believes, or would like to believe, that the ideas advanced in *The Soul of Man*, published in 1890, were a passing fancy, perhaps the result of a temporary mental lapse, should bear in mind that he refers to the essay by name in *De Profundis*, written in prison, and that, in fact, the latter work contains some of his strongest passages about the evils of contemporary society and the plight of the poor.

It should be noted, in the interests of historical accuracy, that socialists, at least officially, did not do very well by *Wilde* in his hour of need. Eduard Bernstein, the German Social-Democrat then living in exile in London, wrote a few commentaries on *Wilde*'s trials, which one could hardly mistake for springing to his defense. Perhaps this was one of the first public demonstrations of Bernstein's growing opportunism. He did little more than make a few general points about the prevalence of homosexuality throughout human history, and issue the useful reminder, in opposition to those who decried homosexuality as “unnatural,” that any variety of sexual practice is more natural, after all, than the most mundane product of modern society, a pencil sharpener, say, or a china plate.

Homosexuality proved to be a sensitive issue. George Bernard Shaw, a Fabian socialist, briefly flirted with the idea of a petition campaign in

defense of *Wilde*, but was persuaded of the futility of such a project apparently without too much difficulty. To paraphrase one of *Wilde*'s quips, Shaw was no Zola to *Wilde*'s Dreyfus—and neither was Zola. The latter, only a few years before his own victimization in the Dreyfus affair, refused to publicly oppose *Wilde*'s prosecution.

The decade of the 1890s was obviously a politically sensitive one. Large-scale industry had brought a modern working class into being, and with it, a politically conscious labor movement. The ruling classes of Europe were made nervous by that development and the increasing tensions arising between the great powers, England, Germany and France in particular, over trade, markets and colonies. Popular novels about invasions by foreign powers abounded in Britain. Marxists argue that the rising tide of chauvinism, anti-Semitism and anti-homosexual bigotry found its ultimate source in the disruption of old social relations, especially in the increased instability of sections of the middle class. This backwardness was deliberately fomented to distract attention from the great social issues of the day and to create a social force, a potential battering ram, to be used against the organized workers movement.

There was, as well, an extreme sensitivity to cultural transgressions. Official society was very concerned about the growing tendency of artists to treat all sorts of complex social and psychological matters. Zola's publisher, Vizetelly, was fined and imprisoned in 1889 as a pornographer. Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* was published in November 1895, only five months after *Wilde*'s conviction. Astonishing as it may seem to us, critics denounced the novel as “dirt, drivel and abomination,” as “decadent” and as “garbage.” Gertrude Himmelfarb may pine for Victorian days, but most of us will probably not.

It is very difficult to initiate any serious discussion of *Wilde*'s work without confronting fundamental questions—the relationship of life to art and art to life, of the objective to the subjective, of politics to art, of an individual to his society and to his time, of the present to the past. He was undoubtedly correct, if a little self-aggrandizing, to note that “if life be, as it surely is, a problem to me, I am no less a problem to Life. People must adopt some attitude towards me, and so pass judgment both on themselves and me.” The problem with *Wilde* the film is that, in spite of a number of virtues, it fails to pass serious judgment on *Wilde* the artist and thus passes an unhappy judgment, that of shallowness, on itself.



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