

leading global businesses product innovation is a circular activity with many development projects running concurrently. Often before they launch one product they are already thinking about the design that will replace it.

**Key Messages:**

Entrepreneurs are usually independently-minded and creative people who start and grow businesses. Evidence suggests that they embrace design at an early stage to support their business vision.

Consequential Design will leave the world a better place. The focus on smart homes enhancing the experience of later life, and the thoughtful design of robotics and autonomous systems will benefit our fast-growing ageing population. We need to design for our future selves.

Excellent design can enhance success and differentiation for business. Design isn't just the marketing graphics and logos, wrappers and websites, posters and packaging. These are part of it and come towards the end of the process!

Creativity is often the sum of imagination and experience; young people tend to have imagination and drive but less expertise and experience; so it is better to have project teams that include people of all ages and perspectives.

During the innovation cycle, Design needs to be the first thought as well as the last, and should focus on putting the right people in the right place.

The key objective is often to embed an understanding of what early-stage design process and strategic creative thinking can achieve in our clients' businesses. They can be used to nurture successful innovation. It is important to focus on both the abstract soft benefits as well as tangible hard benefits. It is also important to gain an insight into design in early-stage innovation: how it can influence value and success throughout UK industry.

The medium to long-term aim should be to move from focusing on *exploring* opportunities for design, to enabling UK businesses to *exploit* design.

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# OSCAR WILDE AND THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN COMEDY

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Oscar Wilde enjoys a probably unrivalled status as a wit. A quick search of the internet will reveal dozens of pages devoted to his most entertaining observations, not to mention a raft of Wilde-inspired gifts from fridge magnets to action figures. However, although critics have looked at the content of Wilde's witticisms, examining for instance their treatment of morality, gender, and the English class system, little attention has been paid to either the origins of Wilde's comic style or the means by which his comedy operates. This lecture addressed both topics and was, appropriately enough, given in the very room where Wilde had instructed Leicester's townspeople on the aesthetics of costume and interior design during his lecture tours of the mid-1880s.

Wilde's comedy requires great verbal panache and confidence, though in the best traditions of dandyism, these should not be proclaimed as virtues in themselves. When the Regency dandy 'Beau' Brummell was told of a man so well dressed that he

turned everyone's head, Brummell replied that if that was the case, he was *not* well dressed at all. Years of enthusiastic amateur performances of plays such as *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) have led us to forget Wilde's original instruction to his cast: the play

should go 'like a pistol shot'. Comic dialogue must be brisk, direct, and deadly as a sniper's bullet. In marked contrast to the sentimentality of earlier Victorian writing, Wilde could be shockingly heartless. When Lady Bracknell remarks that 'To lose one parent is a misfortune. To lose both looks like carelessness,' she is signalling that she has little chance of becoming a bereavement counsellor. By stripping away the euphemistic accretions of 'losing' a loved one, she is also sending shock waves through the world of Victorian propriety. If familial bereavement is now the inspiration for an epigram rather than a cause for sympathy, a revolution in social attitudes cannot be far away.

Wilde cultivated a rich and languid delivery, shedding the Irish accent of his youth and developing instead a captivating tone which held even his potential enemies spellbound. He learned early in life that the ability to speak fluently and intelligently could count for more than unfocused passion. His mother's Dublin *salon* attracted poets, politicians, and orators, and the young Wilde watched their contrasting performances with a keen critical eye, learning the skills (and tricks) which would in time make him such a compelling presence in the lecture hall and the London social network. Between leaving Ireland and coming to wider attention during the early 1880s, Wilde read voraciously, but he also watched and listened. At Oxford, he adored the writings of the art critic, Walter Pater, but he was unimpressed by Pater's shy delivery, which was all but inaudible. Asked if he had heard Pater lecture, Wilde replied, 'I overheard him.' No matter how brilliant (or dangerous) one's ideas, they could not be effective if soft-pedalled. Wilde instead took inspiration from the flamboyant American painter, James McNeill Whistler, not least from his willingness to use comedy as a means of advertising his artistic philosophy. When a woman told Whistler that she knew of only two painters, himself and Velazquez, Whistler shot back, 'Why drag in Velazquez?' Whistler collected his asides in a scintillating but arrogant book with the suggestively Wildean title, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890). Whistler was quick-witted, caustic, and crueller than Wilde. He was also a dangerous influence, not simply because he held the British public in often open contempt but because he had used a London courtroom as a theatrical setting when suing John Ruskin for libel in 1874. Whistler had delighted the court with his repartee, but he had irked the judge: though he won the case, his damages

amounted to only a farthing, and he was bankrupted. Wilde saw the case (the highlights of which were reprinted in *The Gentle Art*) as an example of the artist triumphing over the mob. He did not appreciate that Whistler's art was on trial, rather than the artist's private life.

Wilde learned too from the satirical writing of W.H. Mallock, notably *The New Republic* (1875) and the heartless wit of W.S. Gilbert's *The Bab Ballads* (collected 1882). Finally, his academic studies in Dublin and Oxford encouraged him to play with words, to indulge in experiments with ideas and their implications. When we read his *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (1894) or the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), we can see how stimulating he might have been had he led university tutorials. Adding the word 'Discuss' to a Wildean maxim, for instance, 'All art is quite useless,' and one has a usefully provocative essay or examination question. Few however appreciated Wilde's characteristic paradoxes and overturning of established thought, with reviewers suggesting that they were mechanical and contrived: you have to be kind to be cruel. Only Wilde's fellow Irishman, George Bernard Shaw, seemed to appreciate how subtle and suggestive it might be to talk about married couples washing their clean linen in public.

Wilde's stage comedy was based on the fast interplay of voices, a trick he experimented with in critical works such as *The Decay of Lying* (1889) and in the dialogue of *Dorian Gray* – many readers feel that the moments when Dorian chats with his mentor, the scandalous Lord Henry, are the most memorable scenes in the novel. Off stage however, Wilde's comedy tended to take two forms. There was the memorable contribution to a conversation in the form of a spontaneous invention, aside, or piece of wordplay, or there was the more extended monologue in which Wilde exploited the full resources of his beautiful voice to exert an almost hypnotic effect on his listeners. The latter was however a self-indulgent act which relied on his audience being willing to let him speak without interruption. Wilde could put down hecklers, as he showed on his American lecture tour of the early 1880s, but he could struggle in the company of those who were abrasively quick-witted and disrespectful. He had a fractious relationship with the artist and writer, Aubrey Beardsley (who refused to genuflect before Wilde's genius when

illustrating his play, *Salome*, and filled his drawings with spiteful caricatures of the dramatist), and his friendship with Whistler was too verbally competitive to last, especially when Whistler accused him of plagiarism. When Wilde responded to a Whistlerian sally with 'I wish I had said that,' the painter replied wearily, 'You will Oscar, you will.' Being disrupted in this way broke Wilde's verbal flow and put him off balance, most notoriously in his reckless libel action against the Marquess of Queensberry in the spring of 1895. Wilde brought his suit in the probable belief that he would be able to treat the courtroom with the same insouciant aplomb that he had treated the theatre, or his fellow diners at the Café Royal. He soon discovered however that the law plays by very different rules from the dinner table. Queensberry's counsel, Edward Carson, goaded Wilde throughout his cross-examination, refusing to let him indulge in comic extemporisation and always pinning him down to factual details. When at last he asked Wilde if he had ever kissed one of his servants, Wilde, rattled by his persistence, quipped that he had not, the boy in question being particularly ugly. Carson seized on the implications of his thoughtless comment, and the trial records show that, cornered and aghast, Wilde lost control of himself and became incoherent and flustered. From that moment, he was doomed.

Wilde may have been imprisoned and ruined by the events of 1895, but his comic style lived on. We can see

the Wildean one-liner thriving in the epigrams of Saki during the Edwardian and Georgian era, in the witty early novels of Aldous Huxley (who had belonged to a society dedicated to the 1890s when at Oxford during the First World War), in the dialogue and song lyrics of Noel Coward, and in the satirical comedy of the 1960s associated with Joe Orton and Oxbridge comedians such as Peter Cook, John Cleese, Eric Idle, and others. Their comedy was unapologetic, even elitist, in terms of its cultural and intellectual expectations, from the Monty Python team creating a gameshow called 'Summarise Proust' to the extraordinary collaboration between Cook and Chris Morris, the radio show *Why Bother?* (1994). This was 'modern' comedy, a world away from the community spirit found in music hall, the radio comedies of the war years, or the classic sitcoms of Galton and Simpson or Clement and La Frenais. In time however, it would itself be challenged by a new generation of 'alternative' comedians. With the exception of the self-consciously Wildean Stephen Fry, much contemporary comedy is governed by very different ambitions and imperatives from those of the male-dominated privileged clique of the 1960s and 1970s documented in works such as Roger Wilmot's *From Fringe to Flying Circus*.

The lecture showed how suited Wildean comedy is to verbal expression and live performance, with classic *bon mots* and the occasional inventions of the speaker himself being well received by a capacity audience."