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LAURA MARIN
ANCA DIACONU (DIR.)

USAGES DE LA FIGURE, RÉGIMES DE FIGURATION



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RÉGIMES DE FIGURATION**



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JULES CHAMPFLEURY AND JAMES ENSOR'S VIEW ON THE MODERN ARTIST

BART VERSCHAFFEL

Abstract:

This essay presents a new interpretation of the art and artistic career of the Belgian artist James Ensor, based on the insight that thus far all Ensor scholars have overlooked one crucial source used by Ensor throughout his career: a series of illustrated books on the “history of caricature” written by French author Jules Champfleury (1821-1889). Ensor did not only include a large number of motifs, masks and figures in his grotesque paintings, drawings and etchings (such as the motif of the suffering Christ/Artist), but was also deeply inspired by Champfleury's ideas about the (political) function of the “modern artist”.

Keywords: caricature, Jules Champfleury, James Ensor, grotesque.

The Sources of James Ensor's Grotesques:

Jules Champfleury's *Encyclopédie de la caricature*

The first pivotal moment in James Ensor's career is situated around 1885: the talented young painter, who had already left the academy and acquired a reputation amongst the Brussels avant-garde milieu (but who was, all things considered, still working within the classical genres and the bourgeois view of art), suddenly began to draw, as of 1880, theatrical scenes from the life and suffering of Christ, and to introduce a fantastic and grotesque world of masks, skeletons, phizzes, skulls, monsters and devils, partying masses and processions into his etchings, drawings and paintings. Marcel De Maeyer analysed and precisely dated this sudden turn of events in his important essay from 1963 and also demonstrated that Ensor painted his new visual universe on top of his earlier bourgeois portraits and interiors, thereby revising his previously academic work¹.

The second crucial moment is generally situated somewhere between the mid to late 1890s. From then onwards, Ensor's creativity seems to have been waning, and the controversial and revolutionary artist began to copy and repeat himself, even starting to predate his most recent work – and this despite the fact

¹ Marcel De Maeyer, “De genese van de masker-, travestie-, en skeletmotieven in het oeuvre van James Ensor”, *Bulletin des Musées des Beaux-Arts de Belgique*, n° 10, 1963, pp. 69-88.

that, in this epoch, he was gaining ever more attention and recognition and had evolved into a celebrated painter with a national and international reputation. All analysts and critics of Ensor's work situate the pinnacle of his artistic career within the period that extends from the beginning of the 1880s and ends around 1895. Where they differ, however, is in the emphasis they place upon these two landmark moments within his oeuvre, particularly in terms of their (negative or less negative) evaluation of the late work. The fundamental issue within the field of Ensor interpretation, however, is to arrive at an understanding of what exactly happened around 1885-1886 and to discover the source of this idiosyncratic and fantastical universe.

In 1951, the Royal Museum of Fine Arts (KMSKA) in Antwerp acquired a collection of drawings that was subsequently published by Lydia Schoonbaert (with commentaries) in the KMSKA yearbook and a number of related articles. We know from these drawings that the young Ensor, working in early 1880, certainly made a wide range of studies after eminent masters such as Rembrandt, Hals, Daumier, Delacroix and Hokusai, and also of works by contemporaries such as Charles Hermans². According to the director of the KMSKA, Walter Van Beselaere, Ensor carefully stashed the drawings away "in order not to arouse misunderstanding". Schoonbaert's publications formed the impetus for further detailed analyses of Ensor's inspiration sources and visual references, and/or related artistic works, and the manner in which Ensor learned from them³. While subsequent research has indeed brought interesting parallels to light, illuminated general thematic or stylistic correspondences and proposed *possible* links, it has yielded surprisingly few concrete sources or correlations. The exception being, however, the British caricaturists: Hogarth, Gillray and, in particular, Rowlandson and Cruikshank. Although Ensor praised Hogarth in public, he never openly mentioned any of the other British caricature artists himself. Several contemporary critics made the connection, nonetheless, and Pol de Mont, writing in 1898, described Ensor as "a nephew of Gillray and

² Lydia Schoonbaert, "Addendum Beschrijvende Catalogus 1948. Een verzameling tekeningen van James Ensor (I-IV)", in *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, Antwerp, 1968-1972, pp. 311-342, 265-284, 305-332, 285-311; Lydia Schoonbaert, "'Gazette des Beaux-Arts' en 'Studio' als inspiratiebronnen voor James Ensor", in *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, Antwerp, 1978, pp. 205-221.

³ By, among others, Patrick Florizoone and Herwig Todts. Xavier Tricot drew upon this research for a critical appraisal in his resumptive web publication "Ensor and the Old Masters". His assessment makes it sufficiently clear that Ensor – pace Verhaeren – was obviously indebted to the past. Herwig Todts, "'Make Way for the Old Ones! Respect Defunct Schools!' Ensor and the Art-Historical Canon", in *James Ensor* (exhib. cat.), New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2009, pp. 118-129; see also: Herwig Todts, *James Ensor, Occasioneel modernist. Een onderzoek naar James Ensors artistieke en maatschappelijke opvattingen en de interpretatie van zijn kunst* (doctoral thesis, University of Gent, 2009); Xavier Tricot, *James Ensor and English Art*, in Carol Brown (ed.), *James Ensor: Theatre of Masks* (exhib. cat.), London, Barbican Art Gallery, 1997, pp. 100-117; Patrick Floorizoone, *Negentiende-eeuwse historische thema's en onbekende bronnen in het oeuvre van James Ensor*, in *Ensor-Grafiek in confrontatie*, Ghent/Antwerp, Snoeck/Pandora, 1999. Xavier Tricot, *James Ensor en de Oude Meesters*, James Ensor Online Museum, sources, web publications (no date): jamesensor.vlaamsekunstcollectie.be/nl/bronnen/webpublicaties/james-ensor-en-de-oude-meesters.

Rowlandson”⁴. There has been renewed interest in this theme within the field of Ensor research and Xavier Tricot has indicated, with reference to individual graphic works or series of prints, some noteworthy thematic parallels, including the artist’s satirical works depicting the behaviour of the bourgeoisie at the seaside, the allusions to political and social issues, the theme of the skeleton and the figure of Napoleon... Tricot believes that Ensor became aware of this tradition via a number of British nineteenth-century publications, maybe *An Historical Sketch of the Art of Caricaturing* (1813) by James Peller Malcolm, *A Book of Caricatures* (ca. 1862) by Mary Darly or the *History of Caricature and Grotesque Art* (1865) by Thomas Wright. Yet there is no evidence that Ensor either knew or utilised these works. The situation is completely different, however, when it comes to the first French-language art historical survey of the caricature and grotesque by the French writer and art critic Champfleury (pseudonym of Jules Husson). His study is essential to understanding the genesis of Ensor’s oeuvre. That Ensor knew Champfleury’s work is irrefutable: on the back of *Sunrise, Odysseus Mocks Polyphemus*, a copy after Turner in the KMSKA collection, there is a list at the top which dates from 1884 or 1885. It contains four publications that Ensor purchased or ordered, including Champfleury’s first books (*Histoire de la caricature antique* and *Histoire de la caricature moderne*), stating the author, publisher and price. Curiously enough, the importance of this reference has been overlooked and, until now, the Ensor literature has been devoid of any reference to Champfleury’s *Encyclopédie de la caricature*⁵.

Jules Champfleury (Jules François Félix Husson) was a literary writer with a background in the Parisian *bohème*. He wrote, among other things, satirical stories, burlesques and pantomimes, in addition to a well-known book about cats in art. Yet he is best known as an art critic and scholar, and as a friend and defender of “realistic” writers and artists such as Baudelaire, Zola and Courbet. He was also a lover and collector of folk songs and prints. From 1862 onwards, he corresponded about comedy and the grotesque for the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* and, in 1865, published two books: *Histoire de la caricature antique* (HCA) and *Histoire de la caricature moderne* (HCM)⁶. The volume on caricature in antiquity opens with an erudite and philosophical chapter on the

⁴ Pol de Mont, “James Ensor Peintre et aquafortiste”, *La Plume*, n° 232, 15 December 1898.

⁵ How this was possible is a research question in its own right. I only know of two mentions of Champfleury’s works in all of the Ensor literature – by Xavier Tricot and by Dominique Morel. They both mention the existence of the publications in passing but fail to explore the potential relevance of the work to Ensor. See the first version of this article, published in Dutch in *De Witte Raaf*, n° 181, 2016, section: “Les historiens dangereux”. Champfleury certainly is known in the Ensor research but only mentioned as a background reference and source of inspiration behind the pantomimes made by Ensor’s friend Théo Hannon. See *Ibid.*, section: “Théo Hannon”.

⁶ Jules Champfleury, *Histoire de la caricature antique*, Paris, Édouard Dentu, 1865 (248 p., 62 ill.); 2^e édition (augmentée), 1867 (332 p., 100 ill.), 3^e édition très-augmentée, 1879 (HCA); Jules Champfleury, *Histoire de la caricature moderne*, Paris, Édouard Dentu, 1865; *Histoire de la caricature moderne*, 2^e édition très-augmentée, Paris, Édouard Dentu, 1865 (HCM). I have used the third edition of the HCA, and the second of the HCM.

theory of laughter and comedy, and is structured as a thematic and historical survey that ranges from Assyria and Egypt to the early Christian era. The book received widespread attention and numerous reviews; Champfleury immediately expanded the text, which was reprinted several times. His book on modern caricature consists of a two-hundred page essay on Honoré Daumier, to whom he had previously dedicated a book of literary sketches and portraits of the bohemians entitled *Les Excentriques* (1852), followed by six separate studies of, amongst others, Travies and Monnier, and – more briefly – of Grandville and Gavarni⁷. The two volumes from 1865 inaugurated what was to become a comprehensive folkloric or proto-anthropological study (Champfleury called himself an “archaeologist”), which the author christened the *Encyclopédie de la caricature*⁸ and worked on steadily until his death.

Champfleury wrote about classical theatre and theatrical masks, the cult of Priapus, the ancient performances featuring pygmies and dwarfs, late-classical graffiti, small medieval grotesque sculptures, the motif of animal-musicians, the portrayal of the cardinal sins and the dance of death, Leonardo’s caricatures and Bruegel’s prints, the *commedia dell’arte* and carnivals, Épinal prints and English political caricatures about the French Revolution and Napoleon, Turkish puppet theatres, grotesque Japanese prints and so on... He covered popular culture and the imagination, and every mode of expression that delighted in the wild, naive, unbalanced, vulgar, scabrous, mocking and ugly – in other words, all that had been supplanted and excluded by the academic, bourgeois “high” art and culture: “Antiquity is not always noble and majestic” [*“L’antiquité ne fut pas seulement noble et majestueuse...”*]⁹. The express aim of his *Encyclopédie* was to rescue the popular and lowly genres and the associated imagery: all of the things that were not considered to be art, and were not therefore collected by museums, but whose study he considered vital to an understanding of the history and character of nations. Moreover, Champfleury believed that jokes, ridicule, satire and caricatures were the mouthpiece of “*le petit peuple*” and the oppressed: “The caricature, together with the newspaper, is the cry of the citizens” [*“La caricature est avec le journal le cri des citoyens”*] and expressed “the intimate feelings of the people” [*“les sentiments intimes du peuple”*]¹⁰.

Christ, the *Pisseur*

Ensor, like all artists, made images of other images, and it would appear that he found his source material in Champfleury. Discovering the historical and

⁷ Jules Champfleury, *Les Excentriques*, Paris, Michel Lévy, 1852.

⁸ Jules Champfleury called his project *Encyclopédie de la caricature* in HCA, p. vi. For a “retrospective look” at his project, see the introduction to the *Histoire de la caricature sous la Réforme et la Ligue. Louis XIII à Louis XVI*, Paris, Édouard Dentu, 1880.

⁹ Jules Champfleury, HCA, p. xx.

¹⁰ Jules Champfleury, HCM, p. vii.

culturally vast field of the “low” popular genres and their comical visual manifestations in these few books, he interpolated the results into classical European painting¹¹. He realised, though, that it was not only the trans-historical and trans-cultural image bank that might be particularly valuable and interesting within the context of Belgian art circa 1880, but also the irreverent “tone” and provocative inflections of comedy, combined with Champfleury’s conception of the modern artist. And from 1885-1886 onwards he successfully introduced this material within his work in varied and innovative ways.

It is possible to identify direct and significant borrowings from Champfleury in at least twenty-five of the major “grotesque” paintings and drawings from his most creative and fertile period¹². In addition to visual material, the French writer also provided the perspective from which Ensor apprehended the world of the grotesque. Champfleury is the channel through which Ensor discovered and explored the universe of the grotesque, satirical and macabre, including the work of the English caricaturists. Furthermore, his books offer an interesting framework for an analysis of several of Ensor’s key grotesque motifs, and for an understanding of his rebellious and satirical perspective on art and the role of the artist. Naturally, Ensor would also have looked at other authors and consulted a number of additional sources, but it is Champfleury, without a shadow of doubt, that provides the foundations for his grotesque universe. In addition to providing Ensor with direct figurative or visual inspiration, a number of chapters and passages in Champfleury also shed light upon some of the major themes in his oeuvre, and in often unexpected ways. In brief, I will discuss the problematic of Ensor’s identification with the figure of Christ.

The introduction of the figure of Christ into Ensor’s oeuvre in 1885, which coincides precisely with his adoption of the masses as a subject, is remarkable. It is suggested that Ensor was introduced, whether or not via his Brussels acquaintances, to Ernest Renan’s anarchist-humanistic interpretations of Christ. In the first Christ drawings, or as the titles at least suggest, the religious content of the images is more often than not dominated by a kind of mystical light¹³. It is notable, however, that Ensor almost immediately

¹¹ Ensor most probably became acquainted with the work of Champfleury through his friend, the poet, painter and publisher Théo Hannon. For Théo Hannon (1851-1916) see: Paul Delsemme, *Théodore Hannon, poète moderniste*, Brussels, Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique, 2008 (arllfb.be/ebibliotheque/communications/delsemme041100.pdf); Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Lettres à Théodore Hannon (1876-1886). Édition présentée et annotée par Pierre Cogny et Christian Berg*, Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire, Christian Pirot, 1985. See also my original Dutch article in *De Witte Raaf*, n° 181, 2016, section: ‘Théo Hannon’.

¹² See for the evidence my article “‘Siffler les vices et les laideurs de la civilisation...’ Het groteske oeuvre van James Ensor en de *Encyclopédie de la caricature* van Jules Champfleury”, *De Witte Raaf*, n° 181, 2016, pp. 14-21.

¹³ The title of this series is *The Aureoles of Christ or the Sensibilities of Light (Les auréoles du Christ ou les sensibilités de la lumière)*. For this theme, see, among others, Gisèle Ollinger-Zinque, “Le Christ-Ensor ou l’identification au Christ dans l’œuvre d’Ensor”, in *James Ensor* (exhib. cat.), Petit Palais (Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris), Paris, 1990, pp. 27-34.

integrated grotesque and satirical elements into this theme, and that he selected exclusively scenes in which Christ was persecuted or mocked¹⁴. Many critics believe this was related to the fact that the young artist encountered opposition from every direction and felt misunderstood, ridiculed and “tortured”. His lifelong identification with Christ as the personification of (innocent) suffering, and his satire and social criticism, are all said to have been motivated by these sentiments. It is, however, an implausible scenario. Ensor made his first Christ drawings in 1885 and, while his work might have been somewhat controversial around this time, he was already an acknowledged young artist, a prominent member of the Les XX group and well connected within the Brussels art world. He was obviously still at the beginning of his career, and not everyone was equally convinced of his work, but it was perhaps a little premature of him to complain or brag about being a “tragic artist”. The later date at which Ensor was rebuked for his “grotesque” Christology and early grotesque drawings is an obvious indication that his work was not inspired by that criticism! Champfleury’s writings, however, permit an entirely different reading of Ensor’s drawings of Christ. For Champfleury – who had definitely read Renan – did not view Christ as the prototype of the suffering/afflicted Man, but as a Genius, and therefore synonymous with a misunderstood and mocked Artist!

In the second, expanded edition of *Histoire de la caricature antique*, Champfleury added a chapter on graffiti in antiquity and wrote: “All men are considered great that are persecuted by legions of critics, hostile people and low spirits, who growl, join forces and conspire to reject his genius” [*“Tout homme est jugé grand qui traîne après lui des légions de négateurs, de gens hostiles, d’esprits bas qui se remuent, s’atroupent et font repoussoir à son génie”*]¹⁵. Thus it was with Christ: “Though crucified, Jesus was caricatured” [*“Quoique crucifié, Jésus fut caricaturé”*], although “the caricature could not prevent his touching appearance and mystical aura from enlightening humanity” [*“la caricature ne put empêcher qu’au-dessus de sa touchante figure apparût ce nimbe mystique dont le rayonnement devait éclairer l’humanité”*]¹⁶. In the subsequent chapter on caricatures of Christ and the early Christians, Champfleury discusses the primary examples of the (now well-known) Alexamenos graffito, a late-Roman wall drawing discovered on the Palatine Hill in 1857. It depicts Alexamenos worshipping his god, who takes the form of Christ with an ass’s head¹⁷. Champfleury suggests that this depiction is a sign of Christ’s

¹⁴ “We would be justified in asking whether Ensor arrived at his treatment of Christ through his interest in the unreal light of Turner and Rembrandt. Christ is often shown from behind, and is obviously more than a pretext for the portrayal of light. From his sense of being misunderstood to his identification with the suffering of Christ was but a small step. He openly maintained this identification until the end of his creative period” (Lydia Schoonbaert, “Gazette des Beaux-Arts”, *op. cit.* [cf. note 2], pp. 211-212).

¹⁵ Jules Champfleury, HCA, p. 266.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

greatness: “The caricature is sometimes the black from the white, the night of the day, the back of the reverse, the no of yes” [*“La caricature est quelquefois le noir du blanc, la nuit du jour, l’envers de l’endroit, le non du oui”*]¹⁸. Adding: “And that is why I investigate curious traces of this harsh, unjustly cruel caricaturing, which is one of the sides of the pedestal of genius. Every unjust ordeal heralds a future triumph” [*“Et voilà pourquoi je recherche curieusement les traces de cette caricature, dure, injuste, cruelle, qui forme un côté du piédestal du génie. [...] Tout supplice injuste se change en triomphe dans l’avenir”*]¹⁹. In other words, the denial/misunderstanding accumulates and “provides the foundations” of the genius and future glory. Resistance and ridicule are proof of one and the same thing and presage eminence. It is not so much that Ensor was actually rejected, persecuted and mocked, and thus recognised himself in the sufferings of Christ, but that this type of identification was perhaps a way to convince himself – and certainly to convince others – that he was being misunderstood. Champfleury believed, after all, that the latter was an essential prerequisite to artistry and, of course, Ensor always strove to be a successful artist. This reversal of the standard reading of Ensor’s identification with Christ also allows a more conclusive interpretation of his famous etching *The Pisser (Le Pisseur, 1887)*²⁰. The parallels between the urinating figure and a sketch by Grandville, an etching by Callot and a drawing by Amedée Lynen have been repeatedly stressed. Yet it is not the source of the pissing figure that is crucial for this work, but its placement: Ensor departed from the Roman wall drawing illustrated in Champfleury (HCA 282), transformed the composition, and replaced the original figure of Christ – who, because of the “stake” of the cross visible between his legs, also looks like he is pissing – with the “*pisserieur*”, thereby substituting the donkey-god by the painter. At the same time, the childish graffiti and the jibe is taken over and updated: “*Ensor est un fou*”, i.e. “*Ensor/Christ is an ‘ass’*”.

The Castigators of Humanity

How “political” was Ensor? The themes of protests and parades – in which hordes of people brandish placards and slogans – would appear to confirm that he was a politically and socially committed artist. There are several works with an apparently explicit political content such as *Doctrinal Nourishment (Alimentation doctrinaire, 1889)*, in which Ensor places the representatives of power “in the shit”, and his more or less mild anti-bourgeois drawings, including the beach scenes, or *Plague Below, Plague Above, Plague Everywhere (Peste dessus, peste dessous, peste partout, 1888)*, as well as Ensor’s late invective against vivisectionists [*vivisecteurs*] and the crooked architects that were ruining the Ostend coastline. People readily believe that he

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

²⁰ Compare, among other things, with Lydia Schoonbaert’s analysis, *op. cit.*, pp. 218-220.

painted these themes due to a sense of social engagement and commitment. Again, the reading of Champfleury casts a different light on the matter. Ensor's "political" themes are, in fact, *second hand*: he did not introduce them of his own accord, but imported them alongside the other material he found in Champfleury. The "political" topics of the (French) Revolution, the figure of Napoleon and the restoration, the question of the relationship between the (critical) power of art and that of the bourgeoisie as a social class were certainly urgent and relevant issues for Champfleury and Daumier's generation, as well as for the British caricaturists or Baudelaire, and this until at least the Commune of 1870. On a fundamental level, Champfleury's general interest in the popular imagination, as such, was undoubtedly driven by politics and not (only) art: he considered Daumier to be the modern artist par excellence exactly because he traded the "Fine Arts" for caricature, and turned his political commitment into an artistic position and practice. Ensor, on the other hand, introduced the caricature into his work as a way of renewing the Fine Arts, and he practiced satire in order to become an "exceptional painter" [*peintre d'exception*] and famous artist. It is certainly not the case that he had social and political concerns or felt a moral and political outrage first and sought to express them artistically. Ensor protested even when he had nothing much to protest against, and he practiced satire because *it was something that was simply part of being a modern artist*. French Revolutionary political cartoons about Napoleon and bourgeois life in nineteenth-century France, subjects that were still highly politically charged for Champfleury, were much less so when reused in 1885 by a Belgian artist from Ostend... Nor is it possible to find very many traces of radical political commitment in Ensor's public life. Even though he repeatedly protested against vivisection and the degradation of Ostend and its coastline he seems, in essence, to have led a comfortable (petty) bourgeois life. Moreover, he destroyed every copy he could find of his most aggressive political cartoon – *Doctrinal Nourishment (Alimentation doctrinaire)* – when he was knighted... The protesting, recalcitrant and critical Ensor is a *persona* that the artist himself promulgated from the mid-1890s onwards, and particularly in the table speeches from the second half of his life.

At the end of his long essay on Daumier, Champfleury characterises the artist-caricaturists, "the castigators of humanity" [*railleurs de l'humanité*], as melancholy lovers of beauty who also feel an obligation to fight injustice, and therefore to translate the vices of their contemporaries "into masks as powerful as those of ancient theatre": "This makes the castigators of humanity melancholic. They carry the sense of beauty within themselves, but cannot escape the compulsion to denounce social misery" [*C'est ce qui cause la mélancolie des railleurs de l'humanité. Ils sentent en eux l'instinct du beau, sans pouvoir échapper à la mission qui les pousse à châtier les misères sociales*]. Following on from his characterisation of Daumier, Champfleury remembers an antique

image of a faun, leaning against the stump of a tree, in the museum of the Capitol: “The eyes look melancholic, the mask is at once both gentle and thoughtful. Minus the horns, panpipes and hooves, the statue would resemble an ancient sage” [“*Les yeux sont mélancoliques, le masque est à la fois douce et réfléchi. Sans les cornes, le chalumeau et les pieds de bouc, la statue pourrait représenter un philosophe de l’antiquité*”]²¹. The faun with panpipes and the face of a philosopher reminds him of Daumier: “He also has the piercing horns of satire, and while he still believes in high art, he plays his shepherd’s pipe... and whistles the vices and squalor of civilisation” [“*Chez lui aussi percent les cornes satiriques, et, quoique croyant à l’art élevé, partout il porte le chalumeau dans les trous duquel il siffle les vices et les laideurs de la civilisation*”]²². The young Ensor would identify with this portrait of the modern artist, and Champfleury’s faun almost immediately makes an appearance within his (mask) oeuvre. We recognise him in the drawing *Satan and the Legions of Hell Tormenting Christ on the Cross* (*Satan et ses légions fantastiques tourmentant le crucifié*, 1886), but vague, indistinguishable and semi-dissolved into the background. But we know he is there because he reappears, this time crisp and clear, in the etching *Christ Tormented by Demons* (*Le Christ tourmenté par les démons*), which Ensor made after the drawing in 1895. The artist, emerging from the background, is the lone witness to the ridicule and torments hurled at the crucified Genius... Ensor’s decision to become Champfleury’s “modern artist” is still best encapsulated in a staged, oft-published, enigmatic photograph from 1885. We see Ensor, sitting on a rooftop chimney, playing the flute. We finally understand why Ensor is perched up there, on his “plinth”: He is posing as the authentic modern artist, that is to say, as the faun-alias-Daumier portrayed by Champfleury in his *Histoire de la caricature moderne*. Ensor believes in the fine arts, but he whistles on his panpipes the tune of the *vices* and squalor of civilisation. And this is the cause of his melancholy...

Ensor was working at a time when even the best (Belgian) painters, the avant-garde members of the Les XX included, were trapped within a small range of rigidly defined and hierarchical genres, and a highly conventional, sentimental, censured iconography. Tentative artistic renewal came about, first and foremost, through changes in the way that artists painted – in particular through landscape painting *en plein air* –, via the sense of “light” and the introduction of a clear palette. The important controversy, then, was how (or not) to combine various hues... On the other hand, renewal was also sought in a new iconography: in “realistic” subjects or – as in Ensor’s generation – in literary “*irrealism*” and Symbolism, with its dream-like imagery suffused with desire. Ensor, by contrast, rediscovered the primitive force of the comical and the grotesque: the “low” culture that, throughout the course of history, and

²¹ Jules Champfleury, HCM, p. 189.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 188 (my emphasis).

especially in the nineteenth century, had been filtered out of academic painting. To quote Ensor himself, he “discovered the mask” in 1883 – and immediately, as one of the pioneers in modern painting – consciously incorporated it within his work as of 1885-1886. And he used it both to paint over his early works and to make powerful new images.

The above also casts a fresh light upon the “second turning point” in Ensor’s career: the alleged drying up of his creativity from around 1895 on. It becomes clear that this was not the consequence of an exhausted imagination. In his “miracle years” Ensor made works – alongside many powerful landscapes, still lifes and portraits that fall outside the grotesque – in which he tested what could be done with this major undercurrent of Western visual culture. In so doing, he forged a strong identity for himself as a modern artist. But his artistic *démarche*, after ten years, was complete. What he had achieved was the result of what he, Ensor, in his own manner, could accomplish with the material he had discovered. Which renders the slowing down and the later development of his oeuvre decidedly normal.

Translated from Dutch by Helen Simpson

Part of the evidence and a first outline of the argument have been tested in an article in Dutch, “‘Siffler les vices et les laideurs de la civilisation...’ Het groteske oeuvre van James Ensor en de *Encyclopédie de la caricature* van Jules Champfleury”, published in the art journal *De Witte Raaf*, n° 181, 2016, pp. 14-21. The full argument with all the visual evidence will be published as a book by A&S/books, Gent, winter 2017: *Mock Humanity! James Ensor’s Grotesques and the History of Caricature by Jules Champfleury*.

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Bart Verschaffel is since 2004 full Professor of Theory of Architecture and Architectural Criticism at Ghent University (Belgium). He holds an MA in Medieval History and a PhD in Philosophy. He has published widely in the fields of Architectural Theory, Theory of History, Aesthetics, and Philosophy of Culture. Monographical publications include: *De glans der dingen. Studies en kritieken over kunst en cultuur* (Vlees & Beton, Mechelen, 1989); *Rome/Over theatraliteit* (Vlees & Beton, Mechelen, 1990); *Figuren/Essays* (Van Halewyck/De Balie, Leuven/Amsterdam, 1995); *Architecture is (as) a Gesture* (Quart, Luzern 2001); *À propos de Balthus* (A&S/books, Gent, 2004); *Van Hermes en Hestia. Teksten over architectuur* (A&S/books, Gent, 2006, 2010²); *Nature morte, portrait, paysage. Essais sur les genres en peinture* (La Lettre Volée, Bruxelles, 2007); *De zaak van de kunst. Over kennis, kritiek en schoonheid* (A&S/books, Gent, 2011); *Charles Vandenhove. Architecture/Architectuur 1954-2014* (Lannoo, Tielt, 2014). He is the author of a series of documentary films produced between 1992 and 1996 on visual artists such as Jan Fabre, Henri De Braekeleer, René Magritte, Thierry De Cordier et al. in collaboration with Jef Cornelis (BRTN). He was the curator of two major exhibitions with catalogue: “Giambattista Piranesi. The Print Collection of Ghent University” (Gent, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent, 2008) and “b0b Van Reeth. Architect” (Brussels, BOZAR, 2013). He headed the program section “Discourse and Literature” for the Antwerp European Cultural Capital program in 1993. He was awarded with the Flemish Community’s Biennial Award for Art Criticism in 2003, and is a member of the Belgian Royal Academy of Sciences and Arts.