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James Ensor: Anarchism, Spirituality and Degeneracy in the Belgian *fin de siècle*

Maria Anna Cynkier

The article aims to outline the motifs present in works of James Ensor, a Belgian artist, whose art relates to the Symbolist approach to painting. By iconographical analysis combined with the examination of social factors, this article will evaluate Ensor's contribution to the Symbolist practice during the end of the 19th century. Neglected for a long time by the discipline of art history, his flamboyant visions depicting masks and skeletons are now thought to constitute important emblems allowing for the exploration of the fin-de-siècle soul, troubled by progress and uncertainty and manifested in anarchism, degeneracy as well as spiritualism. This article will argue that the choice of iconography was not solely determined by the artist's inner life, but its foundation can be found in the dramatic social changes occurring in the late 19th century Belgium and Europe.

Camilla: You sir, should unmask.
Stranger: Indeed?
Cassilda: Indeed it's time. We all have laid aside disguise but you.
Stranger: I wear no mask.
Camilla: (Terrified, aside to Cassilda) No mask? No mask![1]

This excerpt, taken from R.W. Chamber's 1895 short story collection *The Yellow King,* encapsulates the atmosphere of uncertainty present among Belgian society at the end of the nineteenth century. Works which could easily correspond to the mood of this scene belong to the oeuvre of James Ensor (1860-1949), arguably the most significant Belgian artist since the times of Rubens and one of few who did not involve themselves primarily with variants of realism.[2] Thus, he is often mentioned besides Hieronymus Bosch and Peter Breughel the Elder. Notably, this is not for anti-realism, as none of them rejected nature, but on the grounds of their shared

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[1] R.W. Chambers, *The King in Yellow,* (2015), accessed December 4th, 2016, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/8492/8492-h/8492-h.htm.
[2] L. Tannenbaum, *James Ensor,* (New York, 1951), 27.

carnivalesque and grotesque visions.[3] The phantasmagorical images crafted by Ensor's perception of Belgian fin de siècle society reveal to the modern day viewer how the closing decades of the nineteenth century were a period of rapid social changes hurtling towards uncharted fields. Ensor's world is a peculiar world, a realm when once known reality underwent radical and appalling transformation – a world of progress, destruction and uncertainty.

Before introducing his bizarre fantasies, Ensor was known to the public as a leader of the Belgian avant-garde, who was committed to landscape and genre painting. Having abandoned the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts, which he dubbed "an institution for the near-blind" after only two years, Ensor devoted himself to Symbolist practice.[4] The Symbolist movement, initiated by Jean Moréas's Manifesto in 1886, was primarily concerned only with literature, however, rapidly extended to include visual art. What interested Symbolist painters was the assumption that an artwork should express the immaterial concepts (or "Ideas") concealed by symbols existing in the real world.[5] According to Michelle Facos, a leading scholar on Symbolist art, there are two main factors that distinguish a Symbolist work: "an artist's desire to represent ideas" and "a manipulation of colour, form, and composition that signals the artist's relative indifference to worldly appearances.[6] Thus, the range of Symbolist works is varied and often very subjective due to the personal understandings of each artist. The process of embellishing external stimuli with internal flourishes is reversed to create a more conceptual, personal and altogether more ambiguous work.

Ambiguity was not merely confined to the singular expressions of these artists but would have been felt throughout society as a result of the *Zeitgeist*. The period of Symbolist activity coincided with the concluding decades of the 19th century, described as fin de siècle. Despite the term being coined a little over a hundred years ago, fin de siècle literally translates into "end of the century" and could thus be attached to every such period but is often specifically attriuted to the 1890s. One of the central characteristics of fin de siècle is a universal awareness of time and future, resulting in the consideration of world events to be moving towards a final conclusion. Historically, fin de siècle have at times been accompanied by prophecies declaring the end of the world, punishment of sinners and, in Christianity, the second coming of Christ. Throughout time these myths were

[3] Ibid., 7.
[4] J.D. Farmer, *Ensor,* (New York, 1976), 10.
[5] M. Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context,* (Berkeley, 2001), 1.
[6] Ibid., 1.

altered and adapted to current events. Furthermore, natural disasters (floods, famines, etc.) and social degradation were associated with a coming apocalypse. Therefore, the term itself did not merely signify the end of the 19th century but described a *Zeitgeist* of decay and decline determined by multiple social and historical factors.[7] This period of rapid change carried a foreboding sense of disaster as uncontrolled progress was seen to deteriorate the morality of society. A fuzzy future hung in the mist for fin de siècle society with nothing certain spare an impending sense of doom and destruction.

These circumstances fostered the development of many new political formations, one of which was anarchism, presently synonymous with violence and often associated with Marxism due to their shared disdain for the bourgeois and ruling class. Nineteenth century *fin-de-siècle* anarchism was pointedly less militaristically authoritarian with an emphasis on the individual liberty, its power and the optimistic belief in harmony and an inherent goodness of the human psyche. At the apex of James Ensor's career, in the 1880s and 1890s, anarchism became a well-organised underground political group in France and Belgium.[8] As a consequence of the failure of liberalism in Europe both political right and left became extreme. In time members of each wing began to reject aspects of present society along with its degradation and dreamed of a utopian future. The anarchist movement appealed particularly to artists as it represented a political situation matching rebellions against traditional modes of teaching and academies.[9] Although it is difficult to precisely establish the nature of Ensor's political sympathies, the Symbolist circles of Belgium certainly leaned towards socialist thought, with the house of young intellectuals Ernest and Mariette Rousseau (whose family were early patrons of and strong supporters of Ensor's work) being where these artists debated politics – all of whom Ensor was close friends with and, being near Brussels, a place which he often visited.[10] While those contacts familiarised him with anarcho-communist theory, he got a chance to observe its practical sides in the group Les XX, a central movement to the development of the Belgian fin de siècle avant-garde. Ensor made his debut with the formation and, though the group itself was not rebellious, through their Salons they employed anarchist tactics such as hanging red flags, red exhibition catalogues and the

[7] S. West, *Fin De Siècle,* (Woodstock, 1994), 1.
[8] Ibid., 33.
[9] M. Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context*, 91.
[10] S. F. Eisenman, 'Allegory and Anarchism in James Ensor's Apparition: Vision Preceding Futurism', *Record of the Art Museum,* (1987) vol.46, 14.

democratisation of art by the inclusion of decorative arts in their shows.[11] Thus, through the rejection of conventions both art and politics worked to vitalise new modes of expression and governance. Anarchism and art were, in ways, social and political commentary in the face of a society unsure of its future amidst a backdrop of upheaval and industrial progress.

The artist, familiar with the works of English caricaturists such as Thomas Rowlandson and William Hogarth, fused this anarchist spirit with satirical elements in the same vein as the aforementioned to create many comedic paintings and etchings which touch upon the political debates of his time. An excellent example of this is the lesser-known drawing *Doctrinal Feeding* (figure 1) from 1889 in which the artist represents members of Belgian Liberal and Catholic parties along with the king Leopold II, all sitting on a bowl's edge. Three of them hold cards: on the left a general holds "Service personel" (personal service), which refers to paying lower classes to serve military terms alongside a bourgeois man, representative of the Liberals, holding "Suffrage universel" (universal suffrage) which would give conservative Liberals more control over the lower classes; on the right squats a bishop with a university rector, representatives of the Catholic party holding "Instruction obligatoire" (obligatory instruction), which alludes to their control over the orientation of education. Leopold II is situated in the middle at the centre and all of them are defecating on the crowd in the bowl beneath. By utilising scatological imagery, Ensor not only antagonised Belgian politicians but defied the beliefs of his contemporaries whilst emphasising his unsympathetic attitude to their value systems. In the nineteenth century, scatological imagery had an additional symbolic meaning representative of assorted cultural realities. Smell was used to differentiate between status and living spaces; secretion of the poor was associated with excrement and the absence of odour of the middle classes implied education and wealth.[12] When viewed from a different angle, movement towards deodorization of the society could thus be understood as an attempt to control society. Ensor takes this to the next level in *Doctrinal Feeding*, one of his most direct political statements, by inverting the scatological referent so that it becomes a symbol of the ruling order, displaying their hypocrisy. Fear of populism and also of authoritarianism of the established order is presented here in a manner both lambasting and humorous. The debasement of the public, as illustrated by Ensor, is a result of the so-called progress dictated by these authority figures. As a scathing

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[11] M.A. Stevens *et al., Impressionism to Symbolism: The Belgian Avant-garde 1880-1900,* (London, 1994), 49.

[12] S.M. Canning, 'The Ordure of Anarchy: Scatological Signs of Self and Society in the Art of James Ensor,' *Art Journal,* (1993) vol.52, 52.

analysis of the upper classes, his work encapsulates the social and political feelings perceived by the public of his times.
Another more frequent visual device used by the artist to explicitly assess social deceit was his use of theatrical masks which, through their characteristics of semblance and disguise, literally symbolised the uncertainty and unease felt by Ensor's society in the face of ambivalent anxiety. The history of masks can be traced back as early as the Stone Age. With the rise of Enlightenment rationalism masks were relegated to a means of disguise during Carnivals where the anonymity loosened social taboos. Conversely, in animistic societies masks were understood as either demonic devices or were assigned various roles (including exorcism of evil spirits, clan cohesion and protection of the dead.)[13] In 18th-century Venice, as a psychological instrument, masks culminated as stimuli for a number of works by Goya, Watteau and Callot.[14] Ensor was acquainted with such compositions and in fact masks were a trademark feature of his, so much so that the nickname "the painter of masks" was obsessively associated with his artistic output.[15] He thought of them in terms of "freshness of colour, sumptuous decoration, wild unexpected gestures, very shrill expressions, exquisite turbulence."[16] Ensor would have been made aware of these qualities from childhood. His hometown Ostend was famed for hosting the most renown carnival in the whole of Belgium. By Ensor's adulthood in the 1880s, puppet shows became a popular entertainment for the Belgian middle class and Ensor was known to visit Théâtre Royale de Toone, a popular marionette playhouse in Brussels.[17]These were cheerful memories for a young James and stipulated his interest in the carnivalesque carrying forward into adulthood and onto the canvas. Masks and their meanings are bonded by an arbitrary relation. They take up the conventional means and easily modify the wearer's cultural identity according to his or her preferences.[18] Ensor understood the double nature of masks: they disguised an individual's fears whilst revealing inner truths and serving as a psychological other. The former notion is most apparent when examined in the individuals depicted in his works. In his oeuvre, as in *The Intrigue* (figure 2), masks and faces are undifferentiated and detached from

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[13] A. Swinbourne 'Meeting James Ensor' in A. Swinbourne (ed.), *James Ensor,* (New York, 2009), 13.
[14] Ibid., 22.
[15] S.M. Canning, 'James Ensor: Carnival of the Modern', in ibid., 9.
[16] D.S. Werman, 'James Ensor and the Mask of Reality', *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies,* (2003), 345.
[17] T. Hyman, 'James Ensor: A Carnival Sense of the World' in C. Brown (ed.) *Ensor,* (London, 1977), 76.
[18] D. Pollock, 'Masks and the Semiotics of Identity', The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, (1995), vol.1, 581-587.

their original carnival context, they become emblems of the horrible and the frightful in contemporary society. They present an uncertainty in turn provoking anxiety within the viewer as they look upon the uncanny. By the inanimateness of masks, Ensor exposes the self whilst simultaneously dehumanising and devaluing the wearers. His masked figures are a means of constructing his own pictorial, carnivalesque language. By only representing a broader section of society, Ensor is able to make a definite and powerful statement about his generation, torn by experiences of fear and apprehension towards the future as uncharted progresses challenged fundamental truths and individuals anticipated the destruction of the known world.

The social insecurity expressed in Ensor's paintings was intensified by factors such as changes in science, particularly within the discipline of natural history. One notable discussion initiated during the 19th century was concerned with the course of evolution. The writings of Darwin and his work *On the Origin of Species* (first translated into French in 1862) divided the scientific community between those who advocated his theories and those who favoured older ones formulated by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.[19]Whilst Darwin's work was a product of the rationalist and positivist spirit of the Enlightenment, the fin de siècle conversely featured a reciprocal interest in the spiritual and intangible which naturally resulted in an increased interest in religion and its impact on people's lives. Darwin's writings were the destruction of solid moral values and signified vast change on a foundational level along with the apprehension that many felt towards such radical new groundwork. As scientific theories endangered religious beliefs of many, the person of Christ as well as Catholicism itself was questioned. The fin de siècle was a time in which Darwinism was under pressure by those who wanted to assert the social importance of spirituality. The divinity of Christ himself and the theological mission of his teachings were now, however, questioned. One of the most pertinent books on this issue was *The Life of Christ* by David Friedrich Strauss published in 1835 and translated into French in 1856.[20] The scientific focus and analytical approach of the book suggested that the power of Christianity lies not merely in Christ's divinity but in his social mission. With his first Biblically themed works, collectively titled *Visions- The aureoles of Christ* or *the sensitivities of the light*, exhibited at

[19] B. Larson, 'Evolution and Degeneration in the Early Work of Odilon Redon', *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide 2,* vol.2 (2003), accessed January 30th, 2017, http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring03/76-spring03/spring03article/220-evolution-and-degeneration-in-the-early-work-of-odilon-redon

[20] S.M. Canning, 'Visionary Politics: The Social Subjects of James Ensor's Religious Imagery', in C. Brown (ed.) *James Ensor 18690-1949 Theatre of Masks,* (London, 1997), 63.

the Les XX salon in 1887, Ensor likewise began exploring the potential conveyed in religious allegory as a vehicle for personal expression, social commentary and intent.[21] This series of works for the first time featured a combination of his earlier pieces; paintings shown at the Brussels and Paris Salons depicting leisurely activities, landscapes and the separate lives of the middle class and the poor. The drawings were executed in a monochromatic palette and principally conveyed the public moral agenda concerning religion. That being said they did not reflect Ensor's religious beliefs. Despite his upbringing in a predominantly Catholic country, Ensor himself had always been deeply anti-clerical.[22] Consequently, *Visions'* Christian iconography did not aim to celebrate religious themes but instead aimed to engage with a unifying idea; the victory of marginalised individuality. They present the life of Christ defined in terms of his interaction with society in order to emphasise this proposal – which could be detached from the religious context and associated with socialist art – of anti-authoritarian posture. Ensor's paintings of Christ, such as those showing Him present at the entrances to cities and parades, combined with contemporary architectural settings, therefore became accounts of contemporary events. With this means, the artist hoped to engage the public in a debate about the state of society and to confront it without invoking intimidation.

Ensor developed these ideas in his most famous work, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (figure 3). The canvas portrays a tragi-comic tide of carnival crowd and Christ entering contemporary Brussels. This is an imagined event inspired by the biblical entry to Jerusalem with the difference lying in the fact that in Ensor's painting, Christ is – similar to the artist – mostly ignored and isolated amidst the masses of modern society. Some of the figures are more masked than others, but all of them are marked by grotesque or caricature with many being demons, witches or death. The figure of Christ atop a donkey wearing a halo with an arm outstretched in blessing might be a tribute to the old Flemish master Ensor admired, Peter Breughel the Elder and his painting *The Procession to Cavalry* (an oil panel painted in 1564 now in Vienna), in which Christ carrying the cross is also interwoven into the mélange of the crowd. The painting can be comprehended as a modernist scene in which the lone individual confronts masses blinded by ideology again reiterating the common theme of the outsider's triumph within spiritual iconography and Ensor's religious works. This reading uses the psychology of the flourishing masses of the 1880s in France to redefine their pathological conditions as "caused by the

[21] Ibid., 58.
[22] L. Tannenbaum, *James Ensor,* 61.

absence of reason."[23] However, the problem with this take is that it assumes opposition between an individual (the source of truth) and the public (the source of insanity). An alternative reading was set forth by Stefan Jonsson who suggests that Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889 depicts the "society degree zero," a community existing before the sociological division on masses and individuals.[24] The hypothesis is relevant especially in regard to its correspondence with the state of Belgian society. This could be seen in the foundation of the 1885 Belgian Workers Party, which shook the country, to the universal suffrage in 1893, a period coinciding with Ensor's most creative years.[25]Jonsson thus proposes a reading in which a carnival is presented as an apsychological event, with "masklike humans and humanlike masks" in which one's identity is a facade only resembling a natural guise as the wearer has none themselves.[26] This pessimistic view on the individual can be expanded to the state of the Belgian society in itself as one which is affected by the broader phenomena of mental and moral decay presupposed by the fin de siècle zeitgeist.

In order to reveal those uncertainties and crises of individual identity, Ensor empowered his works with skeleton and skull forms. He started utilising the skeletons in 1886 to characterise the isolation and anxieties of his contemporaries, including his own.[27] The nineteenth century witnessed a revival in medieval aesthetics that coincided with new discoveries being published in medicine and anatomy. Those two factors combined invoked a rebirth of the depiction of skeletons and death in art. The motif itself goes back to Medieval manuscripts which upheld the religious belief that on certain nights of the year the dead come to life. This macabre belief assumed that the dead can play at being alive but the live cannot play at being dead and led to the production of Hans Holbein the Younger's woodcuts of the *Dance of Death*, the title of which would go on to give its name to a whole genre of pictorial art. Ensor's depictions of death, often oscillating between allegory and parody, are based on the same visual assumption – skeletons engaged in human activities. One example outlining his vision is *Skeletons Trying to Warm Themselves* (figure 4). In it two main skeleton figures, representing a bourgeois couple, are hovering near a stove. A possible dialogue between them is written on its surface: "The fire is out" ("Pas de feu") and "will you find any tomorrow? ("en trouverez vous demain?"). Although the scene elicits empathy, the concept of the

[23] S. Jonsson, 'Society Degree Zero: Christ, Communism and the Madness of Crowds in the Art of James Ensor', *Representations,* (2001), 75, 3.
[24] Ibid., 3
[25] S.F. Eisenman, 'Allegory and Anarchism...' 14
[26] S. Jonsson 'Society Degree Zero...' 10.
[27] I. Pfeiffer and M. Hollein (ed.), *James Ensor,* (Ostfildern-Ruit, 2005), 85.

long dead skeletons seeking warmth is ultimately absurd, eerie and surreal. The idiosyncratic manner of this work and most of Ensor's ouvre, including the aforementioned pieces, is fitting for the surreal circumstances in which Ensor's fellow Belgians found themselves in at the end of a century seen as paradoxically depressed through advancements. Although Ensor himself was not disabled psychologically, he was in ways disturbed at the apex of his career and was considered an outsider. With time, this isolation was hyperbolised and he became a myth in his own lifetime, gaining the nickname "Pietje de Dood" (The Grim Reaper).[28] Moreover, since the mid 1880s, his life became very distant from ideal; the father, who always supported him, was falling into alcoholism and his own mother failed to appreciate his art. The gradual embrace of illusionism and phantasmagorias of his figures can be linked to his difficulties in coping with the people surrounding him. "Hounded by followers", he would later note "I joyfully took refuge in the solitary land of fools."[29] It was a time in which he received a lot of negative criticism. Although Les XX considered itself to be revolutionary it ultimately operated like a usual salon and rejected most of Ensor's submitted pictures. Excluded by family and even by his circle of friends, Ensor became isolated from the art world and in turn created his own, grotesque one.

His isolation is particularly evident in his self-portraits, in which Ensor himself becomes the subject of his vision. One which particularly aptly outlines the artist's relationship towards death is a peculiar etching *My Portrait Skeletonised* (figure 5), completed in two stages. It was based on a photograph (figure 6) executed in 1888 in Rousseaus's house.[30] The first stage of the self-portrait is almost an exact mirror-image copy of the photograph, with only Mariette Rousseau's face removed. In the next stage, the artist reworked the etching by "skeletonising" his face. Ensor postulates the skull's symbolism of the artist not only confronting death, but himself becoming, not an un-dead, but an ever-dying character. On the contrary, *My portrait in 1960* (image 7) depicts the painter's skeleton in the year of his hundredth birthdays. This piece is a melancholic reminder of the temporality of human existence and the only common fate to all people: death. Despite his work gaining recognition in the beginning of the twentieth-century, isolation and a sense of rejection continued to haunt Ensor until the end of his life. In 1942 a Belgian radio mistakenly announced the artist's death and on the following days the citizens of Ostend saw him standing in front of his bust in one of the public parks.

[28] Ibid., 81.
[29] R. van Gindertael, *Ensor,* (Boston, 1975), 22.
[30] I. Pfeiffer and M. Hollein (ed.), *James Ensor,* 87.

In response to their worried questions Ensor replied: “Je porte mon deuil” (“I am in mourning for myself”).[31]

The multiplicity of terms attempting to categorise fin de siècle art share many overlapping qualities thus making the era a difficult one to define. Nonetheless, James Ensor’s work enables us to gain insight into this inconclusive age. He was an artist who created works expressing the times he lived in by utilising grotesque, carnivalesque figures and frightening sceneries. His art is unique in that it regards diverse aspects of the fin de siècle and invites the viewer to reflect on the discrepancies of the period. These conflicts were caused by scientific and technological developments as well as sociological changes. These influenced Ensor’s pessimistic consideration towards his own contemporaries with whom he shared the feelings of apocalyptic doom. With those means he referred not to external, but to the inner world of the viewers and proclaimed his role as a producer and observer of the carnival of the modern. One of the pillars of Symbolist art was the emotional response from the viewers and James Ensor was preoccupied with the relationship between personal meaningfulness and social responsibility, as he himself stated, he wanted “to speak to the men of tomorrow.”[32]

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[31] Ibid., 93.
[32] L. Tannenbaum, *James Ensor,* 30.

Appendix

Figure 1 James Ensor, *Doctrinal Feeding*, 1889, etching, 23.8 cm x 18 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent.

Figure 2 James Ensor, *The Intrigue,* 1890, oil on canvas, 90 x 149 cm, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, inv. 1856.

Figure 3 James Ensor, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, 1888, oil on canvas, 252.7 x 430.5 cm, the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 87.PA.96.

Figure 4 James Ensor, *Skeletons Trying to Warm Themselves*, 1889, oil on canvas, 74.8 x 60 cm, Warm, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, AP.

Figure 5 James Ensor, *My Portrait Skeletonised* (left: 1st state, right: 2nd state), 1889, etching on Velin, 11.6 x 7.5 cm, Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ostend.

Figure 6 Anonymous (probably Ernest Rousseau), James Ensor in front of a window from the Rousseau family house in Brussels, photograph, Ostend, Mu.ZEE, Xavier Tricot Trust.

Figure 7 James Ensor, *My Portrait in 1960*, 1888, etching, 11.6 x 7.5 cm, Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ostend.

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