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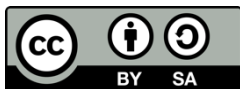
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**Goldsmiths**  
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Stéphane Guégan and André Guyaux, eds, *Joris-Karl Huysmans: De Degas à Grünewald*  
(Paris: Gallimard, 2019), 226 pp.  
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Joris-Karl Huysmans was unimpressed by the Salon of 1879:

Of the 3,040 paintings listed in the catalogue, there's not a hundred that are worth looking at. The rest are certainly inferior to the advertising posters on the walls of our streets and on the pissoirs of our boulevards, those tableaux that represent little slices of Parisian life: ballet gymnastics, clown acts, English mimes, racetracks and circus arenas.<sup>1</sup>

Although he is best known now as a novelist, Huysmans was active as an art critic throughout his life. As well as writing for periodicals, he published three major essay collections and incorporated commentary on art and artists into his fiction. The recent exhibition, *De Degas à Grünewald* at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and the accompanying catalogue and critical collection edited by Stéphane Guégan and André Guyaux testify to increasing interest in these activities and their relationship. His broad dismissal of the Salon is suggestive here, since he rejects the canvases on display in favour of street art. The implication is that this represents a more authentic mode of expression than the scenes from classical myth and Roman history that dominated work by the likes of Alexandre Cabanel and William-Adolphe Bougereau. As André Guyaux observes:

Il cherche dans la peinture ce qu'il cherche dans la littérature: le vivant, le vrai, un art qui ne ment pas, qui s'éloigne des clichés académiques, un art où il retrouve la vie, sa vie – la vie libre et même quelque peu débauchée qu'il mène à Paris. (p. 93)

[He seeks in painting what he seeks in literature: the living, the true, an art that does not lie, that moves away from academic clichés, an art where he finds life, his life – the free and even somewhat debauched life he leads in Paris.]

Just as Huysmans's earliest novels, *Marthe: Histoire d'une fille* (1876) and *Les Sœurs Vatard* (1879) dwell on the lives of prostitutes and working girls, so his artistic tastes tended towards the realities of the street too.

Huysmans's scathing assault upon the arts establishment proved too much for the Republican editors of *La Voltaire*, who dropped him after serializing his review of the 1879 Salon. But Francesca Guegliemi traces his involvement with a variety of other publications including *La Musée des deux mondes* and *La Chronique illustrée* during the early part of his career. This account locates his journalism within Pierre Bourdieu's 'field of cultural production', identifying the internal politics and the frissons of aesthetic and ideological affiliation amongst the coteries and networks

within the French periodical scene. In this context, Huysmans's espousal of Edgar Degas' scenes of working-class women and drinkers in his art criticism became a means of establishing his own credentials amongst the Naturalist writers surrounding Émile Zola.

This fiercely partisan quality of Huysmans's writings on art reverberates at a linguistic level too. He disdained work on display at the Salon as 'the mediocrity of those raised in the State-run farms of the Academy of Fine Arts' (p. 29). Translation here (and throughout) is taken from Brendan King's recent edition of *L'Art moderne* (1883), a collection that Huysmans revised and edited from his journalistic writings. One excellence of King's version is his willingness to depart from literal rendering to capture the nuances of Huysmans's prose. In French, Huysmans wrote about 'la médiocrité des gens élevés dans la métairie des Beaux Arts'.<sup>2</sup> The word 'métairie' here derives from sharecropping and farming practices that hark back to feudal arrangements, but King's 'state-run farms' brilliantly captures the tone and target of Huysmans's disdain. As Aude Jeannerod points out, Huysmans was deeply and implacably opposed to 'official art'. His dismissal of the École des Beaux Arts is a rejection of a whole system, from the training offered to art students to the annual Salons themselves as the epitome of conservative artistic values.

In her excellent essay on Huysmans's style, Estelle Pietrzyk cites Jean Richepin's description from *Gil Blas* in April 1880:

substantifs rares, épithètes curieuses, alliances de mots imprévues, archaïsmes, néologismes, syntax démantibulée à dessein, bariolages, pailletages, assonances, musique tintinnabulante de syllabes, toutes les herbes de la Saint-Jean quoi! (p. 175)

[rare nouns, curious epithets, unexpected word combinations, archaisms, neologisms, syntax deliberately dismantled, jumbled-up words, glittering on the page, assonance, the tinkling music of syllables, all that you need!]

For Pietrzyk, such linguistic innovations demand 'une lecture assidue de bout en bout' [careful reading from beginning to end], forcing readers out of complacency. But she also argues that this style is cognate with his searching gaze ('la motricité du regard' (p. 171)) as a critic, and the 'unexpected word combinations' described by Richepin are central to this. When, for example, Huysmans exclaims, 'into the bin with all this lick polished rubbish by the likes of Cabanel and Gérôme' (p. 33), 'lick polished' is King's best approximation of the word 'léchotteries' in the original.<sup>3</sup> As he points out in a footnote, this neologism combines criticism that their work is fussy and over-polished with a sexual slur and a double-entendre about the proliferation of nude figures in their work (p 271). In comparison, on a panel at the d'Orsay exhibition, the curators render this as 'overly licked and polished', which glosses the word accurately, but loses the energy of compression in the original. Huysmans's liberties with language condense his art criticism into sentences and words that bristle with thought.

In fact, Huysmans's prose as a critic is less dense and more transparent than his fiction. His most famous novel, *À rebours* (1884) employs an even more eclectic lexis, ransacking different pockets of the French language to capture the shifting aesthetic fads and obsessions of his protagonist, Des Esseintes. Outlining the influences that shape Huysmans as a critic and novelist, André Guyaux supplies two highly informative essays in the collection. The first explores Huysmans's links with contemporary artists, such as Edgar Degas and Odilon Redon; the second examines Huysmans's interest in 'primitive' renaissance religious painting, focusing on a later collection, *Trois Primitifs* (1904). Moving deftly between fiction, art criticism, and biography, Guyaux is concerned to trace links and continuities. Huysmans's *Là-bas* (1891), for example, opens with an account of a crucifixion by the fifteenth-century German artist, Matthias Grünewald. Its harrowing realism is offered as an analogue to nineteenth-century Naturalism, but also plays a role in the religious sensibilities of the protagonist, Durtal. Guyaux suggests that Huysmans 'charge Durtal, le héros du roman, de développer son idée' [puts Durtal, the hero of the novel, in charge of developing his idea]. And Grünewald certainly seems to have held a strong personal significance for Huysmans, since he returned to his paintings in *Trois Primitifs* and mirrored his own turn to the Catholic church in Durtal's fictional experiences in the subsequent novels *En route* (1891) and *La Cathédrale* (1898).

The ceaselessly moving surface of Huysmans's style, however, creates difficulties here: his vocabulary is so mobile that it produces a sense of linguistic relativity calling attention to language and undermining confidence in its purchase on the world.<sup>4</sup> So, whilst there are undoubtedly connections between Huysmans and the fictional protagonists of his novels, Mireille Dottin-Orsini and Daniel Grojnowski sound a cautious note in their account of the figure of Salomé in *À rebours*, 'Il ne s'agit plus ici de critique d'art, mais d'une fiction, véhiculée par un personnage particulier, des Esseintes' [It is no longer a question of art criticism, but of fiction, conveyed by a particular character, Des Esseintes] (p. 119). Accommodating the range of Huysmans's writings is not such a problem for a collection of critical essays by diverse hands, but the exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay was less assured.

One difficulty here is that the greatest strengths of the exhibition also prove to be a weakness. As the catalogue testifies, the exhibition brought together a great wealth of artistic materials, including, for example, versions of the images of Salomé before the floating head of John the Baptist by Gustave Moreau that inspired *À rebours*. It also incorporated archival material, from images created as a frontispiece for *Marthe* to a draft of *À rebours* clearly copied into a ledger book repurposed from Huysmans's day job as a civil servant. But the presentation of all that material was hideously over-conceptualized and poorly explained.

The culprit here seems to be Francesco Vezzoli, a contemporary Italian artist brought in to jazz up all the supposedly dull nineteenth-century stuff. Vezzoli compares himself without irony to a DJ who makes ‘des remix’ (p. 22). But the organization of the exhibition was more Vengaboys than, say, anything by the late Andrew Weatherall. The first room was presented in stark white with a panel explaining that this was intended to ‘project the lucidity of Huysmans the art critic into our own times’. Walls in the second room were deep red with large-scale photographic images from the *Vittoriale degli Italiani* – the residence of Gabriele d’Annunzio – on the walls. In an interview, Vezzoli explains that this was intended to demonstrate the unconscious influence of Huysmans’s *Des Esseintes* upon the Italian decadent writer, but visitors to the Musée d’Orsay learned little about Huysmans from this presentation and even less about d’Annunzio.

It is a shame that presentational issues distracted from the wealth of the material on display, but this may have always been likely to create problems. It is illuminating to set passages of Huysmans’s art criticism next to the paintings he described, but also risky, because the fireworks of his prose threaten to overshadow some of the works on display, especially those he disliked. Reviewing Franz Fernand’s ‘Death of Commodus’, for example, he noted:

I initially misunderstood the subject of this painting. I thought the gentleman in the green bathing trunks leaning over the other gentleman in white bathing trunks was a masseur, and the woman lifting the curtain was simply saying: ‘The bath is ready.’ It appears that the bathroom attendant is a thug, an expert strangler who is in no way kneading the neck of Commodus in order to help his blood circulation. (p. 37)

No one looking at the original with these words in front of them could take it seriously again. Huysmans’s reference to contemporary ‘bathing costumes’ jokingly draws out the anachronism driving the fixation with the classical past that motivates such works. This is reinforced by little touches, such as his use in the original French of the verb ‘malaxer’ [to knead], which is more frequently associated with baking or mixing.<sup>5</sup> Deft and agile, Huysmans’s style punctures any pretension towards propriety in this classical scene and it is hard to compete with this. Indeed, the failings of the exhibition show that it is folly to try.

Jeannerod argues that Huysmans’s resistance to the artistic establishment was persistent and characteristic, stemming ‘de conviction libertaire’ [from libertarian conviction] (p. 77). So there is some irony that he should receive official sanction today from such a major gallery as the Musée d’Orsay. The benefit of this exhibition and the beautifully illustrated catalogue is that they bring passages from his writings into proximity with the artworks he loved and hated so vigorously. *De Degas à Grünewald* contains much that is worthy and interesting, but its most worthwhile achievement is to help bring Huysmans’s words before the public they deserve.

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<sup>1</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Modern Art*, trans. by Brendan King (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2018), p. 33. All quotations from Huysmans in translation are taken from this volume. Subsequent page references are supplied in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Écrits sur l'art: L'Art modern; Certains; Trois Primitifs*, ed. by Jérôme Picon (Paris: GF Flammarion, 2019), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Huysmans, *Écrits sur l'art*, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Dowling describes a similar effect in Huysmans's English near-contemporary, Walter Pater. See *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Huysmans, *Écrits sur l'art*, p. 54.