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The amusingly odd protagonist and narrator of Jean-Philippe Toussaint's novel is an academic on sabbatical in Berlin to work on his book about Titian. With his research completed, all he has left to do is sit down and write. Unfortunately, he can't decide how to refer to his subject—Titian, le Titien, Vecellio, Titian Vecellio—so instead he starts watching TV continuously, until one day he decides to renounce the most addictive of twentieth-century inventions.

As he spends his summer still not writing his book, he is haunted by television, from the video surveillance screens in a museum to a moment when it seems everyone in *Berlin* is tuned in to Baywatch.

One of Toussaint's funniest antiheroes, the protagonist of *Television* turns daily occurrences into an entertaining reflection on society and the influence of television on our lives.

Television Details

Date : Published December 1st 2004 by Dalkey Archive Press (first published 1997)

ISBN : 9781564783721

Author : Jean-Philippe Toussaint , Jordan Stump

Format : Paperback 168 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, France, European Literature, French Literature, Novels, Belgium, Contemporary, Belgian, Roman

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Amy says

A neurotic "writer" (he barely gets any actual writing done) obsesses about not watching television (all though he has all these loopholes) and taking care of his neighbor's plants.

Jonfaith says

Sigh, I harbor such hopes. My focus is so soon to sparkle and then, bam, my attentions/intentions dip or are upheaved. There I go. August was quite good to me. I loved every line of Javier Marias. I knew the Premier League was upon me and I thought I would maintain this bliss with Traveler of the Century and that didn't happen. Distractions piled. Football (soccer) was blooming and suddenly. I was lost. It didn't help that the heat normally associated with August finally arrived. Honestly I picked up Television because it had been resting behind me. It was of those ranks of tomes acquired but not yet shelved. They remain legion.

Television served as perfect mirror for my fortysomething floundering. Toussaint finds the painfully beautiful in the quotidian. This a poetics of the everyday. I loved it. I should give this five stars, what was I thinking? I'll likely correct that after I water our flowers.

Sean Masterson says

Inspector Clouseau hijinks mixed with a bit of Bernhardian nihilism. I wonder if his humor was aimed at his predecessor Robbe-Grillet and the nouveau roman which tended to eschew the funny like Camus' Plague.

Been really interested in French post-Existentialist lit lately and am planning on following this up with Michel Houellebecq. I'd recommend anything from Dalkey Archive Press if you want to see what the Europeans are up to. Even when the material is flat I still put the book down with a new perspective. That's what it's all about.

Rose Gowen says

I liked a lot of this. A lot of it I liked very much.

A man (the back copy says he's an academic, so I guess he must be) is on a grant in Berlin to write a book about Titian. It's summer. His pregnant wife/partner & son are vacationing in Italy. He's having a little trouble getting started with his writing because he can't decide what name to use for Titian in the text. He quits watching TV. He agrees to water his neighbors' plants. He swims. He hangs out with his friend. He thinks about stuff.

All this I loved. I found it familiar and funny.

Then, it seemed, Toussaint felt the need to get a little plottier and more cohesive, and I was less charmed.

Ariane Brosseau says

La télévision est un roman ennuyeux jusqu'à ce qu'on comprenne comment il fonctionne, c'est-à-dire qu'il se concentre sur l'arrière-plan des images, sur les choses accessoires que les personnages sont en train de faire plutôt que sur leurs réflexions ou sur leurs actions plus importantes.

Se joignent à cela des scènes très drôles et plutôt absurdes, solutions à des ennuis de celles qu'on imagine mais qu'on ne réaliserait jamais. Par exemple, s'enfermer dans la salle bain des voisins en panique en réalisant que, non seulement on a oublié d'arroser leurs plantes alors qu'ils étaient partis en vacances, et que, pour palier à la situation, on a mis une fougère au frigo et, oh, galère!, on l'y a oubliée et là, les voisins sont revenus, que faire?, que faire! Mais hey! on pourrait passer par la fenêtre de la salle de bain, entrer par celle de la cuisine, sortir la fougère en douce pendant qu'ils sont au salon et revenir dans la salle de bain comme si de rien n'était.

Sauf que, évidemment, ça ne se passe pas comme prévu et on se fait prendre dans la cuisine par le voisin, qui nous croyait aux toilettes.

Que faire à part lui dire qu'on a pris la liberté de se laver les mains dans la cuisine après avoir fait pipi et, lorsqu'il tente d'y aller à son tour, que c'est vraiment très ennuyeux que la porte de sa salle de bains soit coincée?

J'ai aussi beaucoup aimé toutes les scènes où le personnage procrastine en affirmant qu'il travaille son concept en allant faire du nudisme au parc, nager à la piscine ou faire un tour d'avion, et aussi celles où il affirme ne pas regarder la télévision pour pouvoir s'en vanter alors que personne n'en est impressionné.

Bref, même si ça ne s'annonçait pas comme cela au départ, c'était vraiment très bien.

Colin Cox says

Television is an oddly paced but beautifully rendered satire of contemporary culture's obsession with technological distractions. *Television* was originally published in 1997 (its English translation came much later in 2004), so the references are a little archaic. In fact, this book feels rather comfortable situated beside 90s pop staples such as *Fight Club*. While the narrative itself is underwhelming, the book's success is located in its passively unmotivated but hopelessly idealistic narrator. He is a scholar on sabbatical researching a pedantic piece of Italian art, but his obsession with television (in addition to his obsession *with* his obsession with television) stymies his research project. Ultimately, he wants peace and serenity (although this notion is complicated countless times throughout the novel) in a culture that seems to find such quaint preoccupations useless and unnecessary. As a closing but admittedly complicated final statement, Toussaint ends the novel with the following, "Then I aimed the remote at the set and turned off the television. I leaned back against my pillow and sat for a long time in dark, not moving, simply savoring that little moment of eternity: silence and darkness regained" (164). As *Television* illustrates, these moments of eternity are too often momentary and fleeting. Who is to blame, however, is an entirely different question with a potentially less-than-savory answer.

Jeff Buddle says

Perfect Toussaint. Comic with a touch of Beckett, with a dash of Chaplin. Funny as hell. So funny in fact that it's a little scary. Prose that you can cut apart and still not understand how it works. How is so little so interesting?

Paula says

Humorous and philosophical contemporary (1997) French fiction from Les Editions de Minuit, a publishing house born out of the French Resistance during WWII and noted for its catalog of avant-garde and, more recently, postmodern novels. *La Television* tells the story of a French historian on sabbatical in Berlin, ostensibly to write a study on the artist Titian Vecellio. Late in the novel he realizes that Titian's initials are T.V., an amusing coincidence, since, while his pregnant wife and young son are away in Italy for the summer, he decides to stop watching television. The novel describes in detail his daily routine, which turns out to be one of complete procrastination or writer's block: his "work"-life consists in thinking about his subject while swimming at the local pool, staring for hours at paintings in the Dahlem museum, or sunbathing nude (the local custom) in the park. Tales of the protagonist's misbegotten and entirely negligent role as plant sitter for his upstairs neighbors, away on vacation like most Berliners during the months of July and August, and of a ride in a 3-passenger airplane piloted by a female student of his reading-obsessed friend John (a flight that takes off from a seedy airstrip formerly used by the Nazis and the Soviets), are particularly amusing. Throughout the novel, the central character's definition of "not watching television" slips and shifts as he wrestles with and examines this most pervasive of cultural wastelands and backgrounds, purveyor of what he ultimately classifies as "diverse parasitic information." Although I read *La Television* in French, it is available in translation as well.

Annabelle says

Un historien d'art se fait subventionner pour passer un été à Berlin (au CMB?) afin de rédiger une étude sur l'Art et le pouvoir.

En fait, il n'arrive pas à écrire et glande, en dissertant solitairement sur l'usage de la télévision (Une lucarne de lumière, blabla) qu'il souhaite arrêter (Aussi efficacement qu'on arrête la clope.)

J'ai systématiquement sauté tous les passages sur la télévision (Barbants et trop nombreux) pour me concentrer sur la dérive du chercheur et la difficulté de se trouver face à un travail d'écriture quelque'il soit...Surtout qu'il finit par se faire nommer directeur du centre en question! C'est dire si la paresse paie!

Finalement, un guide d'excellents prétextes au non-boulot!

Lolo says

Ce court roman met en scène un professeur qui prend un congé sabbatique en vue d'écrire une étude sur Titien. Seul durant la période estivale, il décrit quelques-uns des événements et occupations qui ponctuent cette période initialement dédiée au travail. Et en filigrane, il décrit son rapport à la télévision, et notamment sa décision d'arrêter de la regarder. Bien que la trame ne soit pas spécialement accrocheuse, j'ai été entraîné agréablement et sûrement dans cette lecture que j'ai trouvée pleine d'humour, très fine et bien écrite. L'observation réaliste de notre rapport à la télévision, de la place qu'elle prend dans nos vies et des conséquences inéluctables qui en découlent n'ont pas été une révélation, mais un rappel que j'ai trouvé judicieux et d'utilité publique...

Schuyler says

An academic acquires a grant to write a book on the painter Titian in Berlin for the summer, while his wife and son vacation in Italy. Early on in his time in Berlin, he decides that television has become too distracting and he swears it off while he works on his book (If this doesn't sound like a pretentious plot, I don't know what does). This proves more difficult than he expected and instead of being distracted by television, our academic quickly finds other ways to procrastinate: swimming, museum gazing, street wandering, single engine airplane flying, etc. And this seems to be the plight of the artist, because his work is never far from his mind:

"I felt a sudden twinge of regret at the thought of having to forgo my work for the day. Truth to tell, it was always this way: the less I thought myself obligated to work, and indeed the more certain the impossibility of working, the more desire to work I felt, and the more capable of working, as if, with the prospect of work receding into the distance, the task shed all its potential torments, simultaneously draping itself in all the many promises of future accomplishment."

And this:

"For the simple reason, it seemed to me, that if you've already extracted all the pleasure from the potential joys of a project before you've begun it, there remain, by the time you get down to it, only the miseries of the act of creation, its burden, its labors."

And that seems about right. The Idea of the thing always feels and looks much better than the Act of the thing...well, sometimes anyway. And of course, the most important thing is the Act, not the Idea, when it comes to writing that is.

This book was written originally in French, circa 1997. Toussaint's views on television are of a very specific kind of television:

"...twenty-four hours a day, it seems to flow along hand in hand with time itself, aping its passage in a crude parody where no moment lasts and everything soon disappears, to the point where you might sometimes wonder where all those images go once they've been broadcast, with no one watching them or remembering them or retaining them, scarcely seen at all, only momentarily skimmed by the viewer's gaze. For where books, for instance, always offer a thousand times more than they are, television offers exactly what it is, its essential immediacy, its ever-evolving, always-in-progress superficiality."

Ok, sure, fine, television can be shockingly bad and requires nothing from us as viewers. But also, television can be really friggin good, at least in the past ten years it has shown it can. And again, this was written in 1997, when television in Belgium (Toussaint's place of origin) was probably really bad, just as it was also really bad here in the U S of A. I mean, come on, 1997, what was on? And I think it's unfair of Toussaint, or his character, to compare books with television. They are two different mediums. It doesn't really work. They offer different pleasures and require different things from their audience.

James says

In this short novel the Belgian author, Jean-Philippe Toussaint charmed me with his wry comic touch. The book is a humorous view of the effect of television on the lives of some people and how they change as a result. The protagonist of *La Télévision* makes one of the most daring gestures available to a citizen of our contemporary world: he decides to stop watching television. Television has taken over his life in insidious ways. It has made him a spectator, rather than a doer; he has become indifferent under its influence; he has no time left for reflection. Yet even as he flees from it, television and its simulacra pursue him everywhere he goes. Video surveillance screens in a museum mock him, as do microfiche machines in a library. The philosophy is suspect, but the humor is infectious.

Romain says

Je revois très bien le geste que j'ai accompli alors, un geste très simple, très souple, mille fois répété, mon bras qui s'allonge et qui appuie sur le bouton, l'image qui implose et disparaît de l'écran. C'était fini, je n'ai plus jamais regardé la télévision.

C'est lors d'un été passé à Berlin que le narrateur et personnage principal de ce roman a pris cette terrible et irrévocable décision — pour les plus jeunes, il devait probablement disposer d'un modèle de télévision à tube cathodique dépourvu de télécommande ce qui explique la nécessité d'allonger le bras et le phénomène d'implosion observé lors de l'arrêt de l'appareil. Elle occupait depuis quelques temps trop de place dans sa vie. Et du temps il en a besoin puisque cet été il est resté seul, sa famille partie en vacances, pour se consacrer à la rédaction d'un gros essai — il a déjà le titre, ce sera *Le pinceau* — consacré à Titien. Enfin à Titien ou Titien Vecellio ou Vecelli ou encore Le Titien comme le nommaient certains dont Alfred de Musset. Cette question du nom à employer peut vous sembler anecdotique pourtant elle ne l'est pas. Elle est même très irritante et il faut bien la trancher pour pouvoir s'atteler sereinement à la rédaction. Il ne s'agit pas de faire preuve de la même inconstance que Proust qui tantôt utilisait Titien tout court et tantôt [...] préfér[ai]t adjoindre un petit article défini devant son prénom et l'appeler le Titien, comme à la campagne — décidément on ne peut se fier à personne.

Ce livre est le récit de cette période de travail (un peu) et de flâneries (beaucoup) agrémenté de réflexions (un peu) et d'humour (beaucoup). L'humour est omniprésent et participe grandement à la légèreté de ce livre. Les séquences sur l'arrosage des plantes (nombreuses) de la famille Drescher m'ont fait éclater de rire à plusieurs reprises.

La touffe, également, paraissait bien pâlotte, toute éteinte et flapie, au regard de celle, fringante, épanouie, que j'avais connue quand Inge [Drescher] m'en avait fait les honneurs.

Je vois déjà les esprits mal tournés qui n'auront pas compris qu'il est question de l'une des plus belle pièce de la collection de plantes des Drescher — la préférée de Inge —, une très belle fougère qui est exposée dans leur chambre à coucher. S'ajoute à l'humour une bonne dose d'autodérision car le narrateur ressemble furieusement à l'auteur de *La Salle de bain* jusqu'à sa coupe de cheveux très très courte agrémentée d'un duvet de caneton.

Cette façon de ne pas se prendre au sérieux permet à l'auteur d'aborder humblement et de manière fort agréable certaines questions moins futiles comme celle de la place prépondérante de la télévision dans notre vie ou plus simplement celle de la production intellectuelle. Evidemment, le tout est écrit avec beaucoup de talent, c'est un véritable régal de lire ce petit bijou que je conseille vivement.

<http://www.aubonroman.com/2013/09/la-...>

Tim says

A self-involved academic narrator allegedly working on a monograph on Titian while in Berlin reflects on culture, art, and himself as he tries to give up watching television in this ridiculous little story. It is funny and perceptive, but also uneven, with scenes of brilliance and others that I hurried through, maybe uncomfortable as they struck too near my self-indulgent bones.

Eugene says

life in the eurozone! across the pond there's a fabled land, a kingdom beating us into decline and empire's twilight by a scant half-century. they say of it that democratic socialism is a viable political party there, but we're skeptical of the outrageous. rumor also describes a state-subsidized intelligentsia so embedded and entitled it flirts constantly with bourgeois decadence -- before collapsing into spasms of marxist self-flagellation. (our native, barbaric artists dream nightly of immigration.)

from those far shores, a message in a bottle. jean-philippe toussaint's TELEVISION was published in 1997 at the dawn of the internet era -- but, *plus ça change*, a find-and-replace of the one technology with the other would make a fairly (you could quibble) lossless reprise.

Television is formal beyond all reason, I now told myself as I lay on the Dreschers' bed; twenty-four house a day, it seems to flow along hand in hand with time itself, aping its passage in a crude parody where no moment lasts and everything soon disappears, to the point where you might sometimes wonder where all those images go once they've been broadcast, with no one watching them or remembering them or retaining them, scarcely seen at all, only momentarily skimmed by the viewer's gaze. For where books, for instance, always offer a thousand times more than they are, television offers exactly what it is, its essential immediacy, its ever-evolving, always-in-progress superficiality (95).

the plot of an academic who gives up tv unfortunately allows toussaint to occasionally lapse from the art of prose into the (admittedly well-done) rhetoric of cultural criticism.

..."No, no, very little," he said, "more or less never, maybe an opera now and then, or certain old films. But I tape them," he added, "I tape them" (as if the fact that he taped them might somehow soften the reproach that could be leveled against him for watching them).

I'd often observed this kind of quiet, troubled modesty when people were forced to speak of the relationship we all have with television. They seemed to broach the subject in spite of themselves, as if discussing some grave illness which touched their lives not indirectly but on the most intimate level... and even out in the streets, in the cafes, in the buses and subways, on the radio, in the offices, in every conversation the subject was never anything other than television, as if the very basis of conversation, its single visceral material, had become television, and in spite of all this everyone went on looking away, forever denying the gravity of the disease (150-1).

but toussaint is at his most hilarious and at his witty best when describing the familiar tiny tragedies of the pampered intellectual:

Then, my breakfast at an end, as I passed through the chiaroscuro of the apartment to make my way toward the study, I caught a fleeting glimpse of myself in the entryway mirror, and I found this image of me to be rather a true one, that tall, hunched form in the half-lit hallway, a cup of coffee in one hand, advancing at dawn toward the study and its thousand untarnished promises of good work to come. My mind still keenly focused, I switched on the computer, which bade me welcome, sputtering like a coffee maker. I pensively opened the hard drive icon with a quick click of the mouse. Wasting no time, from among the dozen or so vaguely bluish folders that appeared before me in the electronic window I'd opened I selected the file... and opened it with two more quick strokes of my finger over the mouse's clitoris, expertly teasing its little ductile zone. Almost without transition, a vast expanse appeared before on the screen, luminous and grayish. I raised my head, my gaze fixed, and began to think. I took a pensive sip of coffee and set the cup down onto its saucer. But nothing came.

For three weeks now I'd been trying in vain to get down to work (25).

an easy-flowing and beautifully lazy(-seeming) writer, toussaint's charming slyness at times distracts from a (perhaps purposeful) shallowness. up for grabs is how much that's mitigated by the fact we live in shallow times.
