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*Section II:
Spectacle and Spectator,
Seeing/Being Seen*

Jean-Philippe Toussaint's Slow Flight from Television

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The televisual novel is now a common occurrence on the French literary scene, and some of the most popular contemporary francophone writers (Amélie Nothomb, Frédéric Beigbeder, Jean-Philippe Toussaint) have written novels that focus their attention on the presence of television in contemporary life. The 2008 edition of the Yale French Studies journal dealt exclusively with literature's response to new visual media, further indicating that recent media transformations are having a significant impact on how writers and critics position literature within contemporary culture.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many televisual novels adopt a critical stance toward television, whether it be by targeting the nefarious impact of the medium itself or the low quality of its programming. In her book, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, Kathleen Fitzpatrick attributes this antagonism toward new media to the fear that the television is superseding the once revered status of the book, displacing the novelist and leaving him or her at the periphery of popular culture rather than at its center. French theorists have also echoed this concern, from Paul Virilio's observation that the accelerated pace of modern technology is leaving the slow medium of the book behind (*The Virilio Reader*, 16) to Jean Baudrillard's argument that narrative can no longer survive in a digital world defined by speed rather than meaning ("The Year 2000", 36).

Yet for all its supposedly detrimental effects on the novel's popularity or on the capacity of contemporary readers to enjoy the slow process of interpreting a text, television is opening a space for the novel to redefine itself. As Marshall McLuhan points out in *Understanding Media*, the introduction of a new medium necessarily affects older media by repositioning their value and use within the entire media ecology: "A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them" (174). Thus older media are forced into flux, searching

for a way to justify their continued presence in the new cultural landscape. As Friedrich Kittler argues in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, electricity and the technical reproduction of data forever changed the public's interaction with books: the precision of the photograph altered the book's function as a preserver of memory and emphasized its symbolic representation (Johnston, 41). With the photograph exceeding the book's potential to represent the past precisely, books were forced to find a different niche and redefine what made them unique and continually worthwhile.

Today a similar confrontation is taking place between the book and the television, leading writers to question what it is that makes literature distinct from visual media and how the novel can continue to be relevant in a rapidly changing society. Jean-Philippe Toussaint's 1997 novel *La télévision* provides a remarkable illustration of this phenomenon in that it consciously works to validate itself in opposition to the medium of television. The ubiquity of television, with its accompanying acceleration of information, its isolation, its disembodiment and dehumanization – all classic attacks leveled at new technology – offers an opportunity to see the novel as dramatically different both in its format and its effect on the reader. Toussaint presents a comprehensive analysis of television's unhealthy influence, then demonstrates how literature can provide a safe haven from, if not an antidote to, the social and personal repercussions of televisual addiction. *La télévision* emphasizes the slow, meditative aspects of narrative, stressing the very qualities that make literature distinct amid a background of fast-paced and fragmented information. In contrast to the spectacular events broadcast on television, Toussaint's novel focuses on the ordinary aspects of everyday life – swimming, reading, sitting in the park – and elevates these often disregarded moments to the status of "events". It highlights the sensual connection between one's body and the surrounding environment, demonstrating that slowing down and tuning in to the senses can replenish the void created by modern-day technology. Toussaint essentially transforms the most common attacks on the novel – that it is slow, isolating, and dull – into the very qualities that mark its glory.

SPEED

For Toussaint's protagonist, television's primary flaw concerns the rate at which it conveys information. Rather than adapting to the human rhythm of perception, the images move faster than the time it takes the spectator to process them. The diffusion of images is relentless, never allowing for a pause or a moment of quiet reflection. Moving through all the channels, the protagonist realizes that there is no end to the broadcasting, the machine

accelerating at a mad and exhausting rate: “du mouvement encore, rapide et affolé, s’accélérait toujours à perdre haleine, comme cette lancinante prise de vue subjective d’une locomotive [. . .]” (131). There is no opportunity for the mind to rest or make sense of the content, which in itself is varied and confusing. The stream of programming is detailed in a long, disordered list: “c’était des clips, c’était des chansons en anglais, c’était des jeux télévisés, c’était des documentaires, c’était des scènes de film sorties de leur contexte, des extraits [. . .]” (19). The list continues over three pages, and gives the impression of utter clutter, all of it equivalent and interchangeable. Toussaint’s narrator argues that televisual images are aggressive, assailing the mind and rendering it immobile in the face of its relentless stimulation: “à peine notre esprit, alerté par ces signaux, a-t-il rassemblé ses forces en vue de la réflexion, que la télévision est déjà passée à autre chose, à la suite, à de nouvelles stimulations, à de nouveaux signaux tout aussi stridents que les précédents” (22). The mind grows accustomed to being bombarded by these senseless, fluid images and prefers to accept the television’s stimulation passively rather than attempt to make sense of it. The accelerated pace of the television exceeds the human mind’s rate of comprehension.

This is a rather common criticism of television, especially from the perspective of writers and readers who work within a much slower medium. For Pierre Bourdieu, the pressure to produce television in a rapid, instantaneous fashion impedes the expression of thought: he refers to Plato’s opposition of the philosopher who has time and the people in the agora who are in a hurry; deep reflection necessarily depends on having the time to elaborate an idea, reason through its complexity, and debate opposing views (28). Because television asks its guests to think on the spot, they are reduced to speaking only through clichés. The result is a false sense of communication between the television celebrities and their audience: the “received ideas” transmitted by the television do not require decoding, and are thus empty of substance. As Bourdieu writes, “The exchange of commonplaces is communication with no content other than the fact of communication itself” (29). True thought, for Bourdieu, depends on the slow process of reasoning through an idea, a concept entirely opposed to the “fast food” presented on television.

Not only does a book require a much longer time in terms of its communication process, it also requires a much longer time to create and publish, creating a delay that fails to hold up to the immediacy of other media. As Paul Virilio explains, “It is real time that threatens writing. Writing is always, always, in a deferred time, always delayed. Once the

image is live, there is a conflict between deferred time and real time, and in this there is a serious threat to writing and the author" (*The Virilio Reader*, 16). Reading a book is akin to studying old news, whereas live television can deliver information instantaneously.

This is perhaps a primary reason for the marginalization of the book in *La télévision's* televisual culture. The book represents an outdated piece of technology that has failed to keep pace with the growing popularity of the screen. The protagonist's television set has legs that resemble open books, giving it the appearance of resting triumphantly atop the book, "comme un reproche tacite" (8). The cultural dominance of television is evident in other ways as well: the only reading material readily available in every home is the TV guide, and the protagonist fears that this part of the newspaper, which once only occupied a small section, will one day come to command the daily news and leave only a small column for the affairs of the world (55). Although eager to lend their books "tant qu'on voulait", people are reticent to part with their televisions, suggesting that what matters most is not the printed word but rather the televisual image.

The question for Toussaint, then, becomes how to valorize slowness in a fast-paced culture. While Toussaint avoids the now common opposition between the cheap entertainment of television and the critical thought of books, he does correlate the leisurely pace of his protagonist with pleasure, and the numbingly fast rate of television with exhaustion. Attempting to keep pace with the television leaves both mind and body exhausted, draining the protagonist of his strength and vitality: "Je sortais de ces retransmissions nauséux et fourbu, l'esprit vide, les jambes molles, les yeux mousses" (10). He experiences "une ivresse mauvaise" (18) following long sessions of viewing television and realizes that his attraction to the screen is akin to a drug addiction: "Sans pouvoir réagir, j'avais conscience d'être en train de m'avilir en continuant à rester ainsi devant l'écran" (19).

Meanwhile, the protagonist's leisurely pursuits (swimming, making love, thinking) are tied to sensual pleasure. He admits to swimming at the slow pace of only two kilometers per hour ("je nage lentement, comme une vieille dame"), yet this rate is what allows him to experience the sensation of his movement and the feeling of the water on his body (11). Making love, another slow activity, results in the same sort of physical pleasure:

J'aime beaucoup faire l'amour en effet (à plus d'un titre), et, sans vouloir ici évoquer mon style en la matière, qui s'apparenterait d'ailleurs plus à la quiétude sensuelle d'une longueur de brasse qu'à l'énergie désordonnée et virilement fanfaronne d'un quatre

cent mètres papillon, je retiendrai surtout que faire l'amour m'apporte un grand équilibre intérieur, et que, l'étreinte passée, tandis que je rêve sur le dos dans la douceur des draps en savourant la simple bonhomie de l'instant qui s'écoule, je ressens une irrépressible bonne humeur qui vient se traduire sur mon visage par un léger sourire inattendu et quelque chose de brillant dans l'oeil, de malicieux et de complice. (12)

His ability to perceive the various sensations that pass through his body is dependent on leisure and the freedom to savor the present moment rather than passing on to the next one. The citation above, quoted at length, also illustrates how Toussaint represents the sensation of leisure through his lengthy, descriptive style, deliberately slowing down his narrative to present it as an alternative to the fast-paced time of television. The citation is in fact one long sentence, its sinuous structure prolonging the experience described and delaying its completion in order to highlight all the sensations of the moment. Toussaint revels in the deferral and slowness of the novel's medium, creating a leisurely aesthetic in *La télévision's* lengthy description and focus on process and perception.

Privileging description rather than plot, the novel is structured by long paragraphs, often spanning several pages, that incorporate the dialogue to allow for the continuous, uninterrupted development of the narrator's meditation. The lengthy descriptions also arrest the movement of the narrative, pausing the succession of events in order to rest in place and contemplate the present rather than speeding ahead to the next scene. Like the main character of *La télévision* who spends hours contemplating a single painting, Toussaint's reader is asked to pause and immerse himself in the still moment.

It is no coincidence that the protagonist's academic interest relates to art; painting is present throughout the novel, and it is crucial for Toussaint as a contrast to television. The painting's slow images, unlike the flickering shots of the television, allow for slow contemplation and the essential process of creating meaning, which the protagonist finds to be impossible at televisual speed. While at the Berlin Art Museum, he finds that Dürer's paintings inspire him with a medley of emotions and thoughts, much like the confusion that erupts from the television. However, having the time to process the painting is what allows those chaotic thoughts to come together: "de ce désordre, de ce chaos interne, naissait un sentiment de plénitude et l'apparence d'une cohérence" (188). Similarly, *La télévision's* lengthy descriptive style approximates the still aesthetic of a painting, lingering over details and relishing in the sensation of the prolonged moment.

One might argue that it is the length of processing that allows the painting, or the book, to have a transformative effect on perception and consciousness. As Victor Shklovsky states in his 1917 essay “Art as Technique”, this desire to linger over a particular sensation is directly related to art’s aims: “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (12). Shklovsky argues against extending the economy of energy, which governs “practical language”, to poetic language (10). The purpose of art is not to make things easy to understand by communicating meaning with the fewest possible words, but to instead slow down the process of perception and transform the automatic response into a slow and unfamiliar one. It is only in slowing down that perception and rendering it strange that one may recover “the sensation of life”.

Likewise, Toussaint’s narrative favors the poetic rather than the practical, neglecting the progress of the story to foreground that oft forgotten sensation of leisure and the aesthetic, sensorial pleasures it elicits. Efficiency is of little concern here, either for the protagonist (who fails to make progress on his book due to the constant presence of pleasurable distractions) or for the narrative, which hinges in time while the description elaborates the aesthetic and sensorial details of the protagonist’s experience. If there is a counterpoint to the hectic activity of television programming, it is the experience of digesting the leisurely narrative of *La télévision*.

ORDINARY EVENTS

The disregard for efficiency also leads Toussaint to favor inconsequential events, effectively creating a narrative about ordinary, insignificant experience. Unlike the spectacular and eventful content of television programming, in Toussaint’s novel very little happens at the level of story: the protagonist is on sabbatical, attempting to write a book on Titian and avoid the television while failing on both counts. The academic’s actual work, that of writing his book, is constantly delayed, allowing him to reflect on the process of work and to feel the sensation of time passing by rather than completing the task:

Ce qui permettait sans doute le mieux d’évaluer la réussite d’une journée de travail, me semblait-il, c’était la manière dont nous avions perçu le temps passer pendant les heures où nous avions travaillé, la faculté singulière que le temps avait eue de se charger du poids de notre travail [. . .] (127)

It is the duration of time rather than its productive output that matters here, drawing attention to the aesthetic quality of experience. This of course runs counter to the ethos of hypermodernity, which privileges excess and the consumption of large amounts of products and experiences. As philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky writes, "There are ever more demands for short-term results, and an insistence on doing more in the shortest possible time and acting without delay: the race for profits leads to the urgent being prioritized over the important, immediate action over reflection, the accessory over the essential" (*Hypermodern Times*, 50). In this hectic race for results, disregarding productivity to enjoy the moment seems downright subversive. Toussaint is clearly positioning his protagonist (and his leisurely aesthetic) as an outsider to the present cultural context.

Toussaint is known for writing novels where not much happens. In his book, *Fuzzy Fiction*, Jean-Louis Hyppolyte characterizes Toussaint's protagonists by an aversion to exertion and a preference for a sabbatical pace of life (28). He notes that work environments are conspicuously omitted from Toussaint's narratives, and that instead "the stories largely take place during vacations, weekends, evenings, outings, museum visits, shopping expeditions, travel abroad, and finally at home" (29). While this retreat from the hectic world enables the protagonists to act as ideal observers of the society around them, standing still while others rush in frenzy, it also allows Toussaint to focus the reader's attention on the writing in his novels rather than the plot. As Toussaint stresses in a 1998 interview:

J'accorde évidemment une très grande importance à la manière d'écrire puisque, comme il n'y a pas d'histoire, il ne reste que l'écriture. Dès lors qu'il y a une histoire, elle fait passer l'écriture au second plan comme un moyen. S'il y a une histoire forte, fortement charpentée, qui avance et puis tout ça. . . , l'écriture n'est qu'un moyen plus ou moins efficace qui fait suivre cette histoire et le lecteur est entraîné dans l'histoire. Si l'on enlève cet élément, il ne reste que l'écriture, et c'est l'écriture elle-même qui va faire avancer. (*L'intérêt viendra de l'écriture*, <http://www.berlol.net/foire/fle98to.htm>)

For Toussaint, minimizing the actual events in his novels is a way to foreground the writing rather than detracting from it by creating other distractions. Reducing the events of the story evokes a minimalist tendency in postmodern art to focus on the material itself (in this case, language) rather than seeing it as a vehicle for the expression of other ideas (Schoots,

128). When events do occur in *La télévision*, they tend to be banal and inconsequential: watering the neighbors' flowers, sunbathing in the park, visiting with friends. The lack of grand events presents the opportunity for comic irony, as when the protagonist describes his mundane tour of the Dreschers' apartment: "Assis sur le lit des Drescher, je tournais ma cuillère dans ma tasse, lentement, sortis la petite cuillère de la tasse et la suçai pour l'assécher. [. . .] Je bus une petite gorgée de café, reposai la tasse dans la soucoupe. La vie, quoi" (27). The protagonist repeatedly foils the reader's expectation that something grand will happen: after building the suspense prior to announcing to Delon, his partner, that he has stopped watching television, the protagonist awaits her reaction with anticipation – will she respond with surprise or encouragement to this stunning news? The scene ends with the anticlimactic response, "Oui, nous non plus on ne la regarde pas tellement ici, me dit-elle" (93). The build-up is undercut by a non-event. In fact, the entire novel is driven by the non-activity of avoiding television, stressing what does not occur rather than what does.

Warren Motte sees this preference for the uneventful as a trend in French fiction since 1990, describing novels that fit this category as "postexotic" and defining them by "the rejection of the exceptional and the extraordinary in favor of a focus on the ordinary and on the banality of everyday life" (*Fables*, 3). For Toussaint as well as J.M.G. Le Clézio, Eric Chevillard, and Marie NDiaye, among others, it seems that the best narrative arises from seemingly insignificant events. It is perhaps no coincidence that the rise of this "postexotic" novel comes at a time when television and social media seem to dominate coverage of big events. Many theorists argue that we are bombarded by information and events to the point where those events are no longer meaningful. Marc Augé defines 'supermodernity' as an "overabundance of events" (*Non-Places*, 33), while Jean Baudrillard argues that "the entire system of information is an immense machine made to produce events as signs, as values exchangeable on the universal market of ideologies, of spectacle, catastrophes, etc [...]" (*Shadow*, 117). Television seeks to broadcast the most spectacular, dramatic, extraordinary events, and it may be this very reason why Toussaint and other writers are eschewing large events in their narratives.

This is not to say that ordinary experience is all that is left for novelists once the television has monopolized everything of heavy significance. Toussaint's narrator points out that there is value in the small events that are so often ignored by the media. He explains the contrast between TV's dramatic events and the triumph of the ordinary:

Une des caractéristiques de la télévision, en effet, quand on ne la regarde pas, est de nous faire croire que quelque chose pourrait se passer si on l'allumait, que quelque chose pourrait arriver de plus fort et de plus inattendu que ce qui nous arrive d'ordinaire dans la vie. Mais cette attente est vaine et perpétuellement déçue évidemment, car il ne se passe jamais rien à la télévision, et le moindre événement de notre vie personnelle nous touche toujours davantage que tous les événements catastrophiques ou heureux dont on peut être témoin à la télévision. (95)

Paradoxically, the smallest event in everyday life trumps the extraordinary events shown on television, by mere virtue of occurring in reality and actually “touching” the individual. Toussaint’s focus on banality is a counterpoint to television, considering that the television so often emphasizes unusual occurrences such as fires, floods, murders, and interpersonal turbulence. Virtual reality rivals everyday reality by claiming to be more exciting and dynamic than its viewers’ ordinary lives. In *On Television*, Pierre Bourdieu criticizes the sensationalism of televised journalism and its interest in “anything extraordinary, in anything that breaks the routine” (20). For Bourdieu, this preference for scandal and intrigue is a failure to appreciate the more common events of everyday existence:

There is nothing more difficult to convey than reality in all its ordinariness. Flaubert was fond of saying that it takes a lot of hard work to portray mediocrity. Sociologists run into the problem all the time: How can we make the ordinary extraordinary and evoke ordinariness in such a way that people will see just how extraordinary it is? (21)

La télévision, despite its seeming lack of adventure or eventfulness, may in fact be bringing the forgotten experience of lived reality to the level of an event, or, in Paul Virilio’s words, emphasizing “those microevents of daily life that ought to shape our judgment, our sense of reality, and that we too often neglect in favor of economic and political events” (*A Landscape of Events*, 65). Toussaint suggests that the immediate, local experience of interacting with one’s neighbors or basking in the midday sun should hold as much relevance as the removed yet seemingly more spectacular events broadcast to us via the television. The attention devoted to these small moments elevates their significance, giving them a substance that is often overlooked in the wide-angle view of global broadcasting.

RECOVERING THE SENSES

In addition to emphasizing leisure and the “microevents” of daily life, Toussaint’s protagonist suggests that avoiding television allows one to reconnect to one’s own often forgotten body. He argues that the television disembodies its spectators and reduces the sensory experience to only two senses. While it entertains our eyes and ears, television numbs our touch, taste, and smell, depriving us of the pleasures of the everyday, lived environment in which we live. Though it purports to be an extension of man, allowing the spectator to see events and people that would normally be out of his/her reach, television in fact transforms its user into an amputee, limiting the horizon of experience to sight, sound, and a single electric apparatus. *La télévision*’s narrator reflects on this sensory deprivation: “je songeais que c’était pourtant comme ça que la télévision nous présentait quotidiennement le monde: fallacieusement, en nous privant, pour l’apprécier, de trois des cinq sens [. . .]” (170). In addition to exhausting the body by moving at a superhuman speed, the television denies its user the full sensorial experience. This critique of television having a negative impact on the physical body is fairly well established. In her essay, “The Scene of the Screen”, Vivian Sobchack points to the way the body is undermined by electronic technology: “[. . .] electronic representation by its very structure phenomenologically denies the human body its fleshly presence and the world its dimension” (137). However significant and positive its values in some regards, the electronic trivializes the human body. Indeed, at this historical moment in our particular society and culture, the lived-body is in crisis (Caldwell 152). Sobchack laments the way the body is now seen as a limitation, a package of meat that holds us back from the more liberating experience of virtual reality. Paul Virilio echoes this concern that contemporary individuals no longer live through their bodies and senses, but rather through disembodied screens: “Tele-presence muddles the distinction between the *near* and the *far*, thus casting doubt on our presence *here* and *now* and so dismantling the necessary conditions for sensory experience” (*Open Sky*, 45). We are no longer carnal beings responding to our material environments, but rather virtual subjects floating through a simulated environment.

While avoiding television, *La télévision*’s protagonist demonstrates that physical connection to one’s own body can be regained. Whereas television exemplifies Paul Virilio’s notion of the VOID (*vide*), a fast-paced media environment where information travels quickly but leaves the user inert, everyday mundane events offer a comforting example of the VITAL (*vif*).

Focusing on “microevents” and slowing down the pace of perception allows Toussaint to foreground the body by emphasizing the slow unraveling of the senses. With little else happening that would distract one from physical sensation, the narrative turns inward, focusing on the subjective, corporeal experience of the narrator.

Unlike some of Toussaint's earlier novels, such as *L'appareil-photo* or *La salle de bain*, *La télévision* privileges the perspective of the narrator over the objective description of events. The contrast is apparent in the juxtaposition of two descriptive scenes, one from *La salle de bain*, the other from *La télévision*:

A côté de la grande baie vitrée, dans un renforcement, se trouvaient les locaux du Syndicat d'initiative. Je regardai les photos, les affiches. Derrière le comptoir, une demoiselle téléphonait, prenait des notes de la main droite. (*La salle de bain*, 50).

Je finis par ouvrir un oeil, toujours allongé sur le dos sur la pelouse du parc de Halensee, et, comme il arrive souvent lorsque on a gardé trop longtemps les yeux fermés sous la lumière du soleil, toutes les couleurs de la nature, le vert de la pelouse et le bleu très dense du ciel me parurent alors remarquablement nets et brillants, comme lavés à grande eau sous l'éclat métallique d'une averse damasquinée. (*La télévision*, 82).

The staccato sentences in *La salle de bain* hasten the succession of events by communicating in a direct, efficient way what is occurring in the scene. *La télévision*, on

the other hand, mediates all the events through the slow, complex perceptions of the narrator, resulting in lengthy, indirect sentences, subordinate clauses, and a foregrounding of sensation. The stylistic choice is tied to a deliberate message, namely communicating sensation, aesthetic appreciation, and engagement with the lived world. *La télévision*'s protagonist privileges his sensorial pleasure to such an extent that the hard work of writing his next book often falls to the wayside. Driven primarily by hedonism, his choices reflect his momentary desire. This distinguishes *La télévision* from the abundance of literature encouraging telespectators to avoid television in order to pursue more academic, challenging, or edifying interests. The snobbery apparent in many televisual critiques that contrast the easy entertainment of television with the intellectual rigor of more mentally stimulating activities is not present here; what determines the value of any pursuit is instead the pleasure that it brings. While several

references are made to fine art and literature, they are often undercut by the needs and desires of the protagonist's baser instincts: while at the art museum, for instance, the protagonist seems to be as intrigued by his sandwich as he is by the works of art (186– 187). Likewise, upon finishing Musset's *Le fils du Titien*, the protagonist has a most profound epiphany: that he has become sunburned while engrossed in the book (73). The body is always present and drawing attention to its needs.

The importance of the body in *La télévision* is also apparent in the attention paid to the character of Delon, who is defined by her physical pleasure and bodily condition. Delon is pregnant, a fact that is continually highlighted in her conversations with the protagonist as well as the physical description of her extended body. With her pregnancy representing a biological rather a technological time, Delon is elevated to a sacred status, described as "majestic" and expressing "the legitimate pride of carrying with her the destiny of an empire" (208). The protagonist's fascination with his partner's pregnant body suggests his own desire to see the body as the site of productivity, as opposed to the pressure to displace one's interests onto external and remote subjects.

Delon's presence in the book is intriguing because it seems to so effectively counter the image of the body in hypermodern culture. In her book, *The Perfect Machine: Television and the Bomb*, Joyce Nelson describes the ideal body in the nuclear age as that of the astronaut: "the completely masked man, rootless and floating, impermeable and disconnected (except for technological mediations), fully beyond circadian rhythms and influences, ungrounded, efficient, and completely monitored and dependent on technology" (161). Delon's body, meanwhile, is that of the pregnant woman, tied to nature and biological rhythms, working at its own pace and connected to another being. Toussaint seems to offer a completely different model for the body, one that opposes the efficiency and technological dependency so often associated with the contemporary body.

Another means of reconnecting to embodied experience is through art and literature, which are anchored in bodily pleasure. For the protagonist, Renaissance painting reflects the presence of a physical body whose trace can be read in the brush strokes:

[. . .] des huiles et des coups de brosse sur la toile, des retouches légères, au pinceau ou même au doigt, d'un simple frottement du bord du pouce dans la pâte encore légèrement humide d'huile de lin, d'avoir en face de soi quelque chose de vivant, de la chair

ou des cheveux, de l'étoffe ou des drapés, d'être en présence d'un personnage complexe, humain [. . .] (13).

The mark of the painter's hand creates a direct connection between the work of art and the body of its creator. Likewise, to look at the painting is to allow it to invade the spectator's senses and to leave its imprint on one's imagination and sensibility. In recreating Titian's painting from memory, the protagonist is able to recall the details of his subject's gesture, his expression, the lines of his face, and even the cracks in the veneer (196). The work of art is thus a sensorial experience, an intimate connection with another human being. Thus the protagonist manages to revive his senses after a long period of neglect. Following the physical inertia and sensory deprivation of long sessions of watching television, he finds that slowing down and focusing on the sensations of his body awakens his sensitivity to physical comfort. The result is an orientation toward pleasure that comically prevents him from doing any productive work; yet given the opposition between the physically deadening effect of sitting in place watching the world on a screen and engaging in the senses to maximize one's physical pleasure, the protagonist's hedonism seems a preferable and refreshing approach to leisure.

REGAINING A SENSE OF PLACE

Another element of daily life forgotten by the attraction to the screen are the living, breathing humans who comprise the telespectator's immediate community. In an anthropological sense, the increasing pace of life has commonly been associated with a disengagement from one's environment. Marc Augé has famously described this transformation, whereby anthropological places that are "relational, historical, and concerned with identity" (*Non-Places*, 77) lose their intimacy and singularity, becoming only spaces that are passed through rather than lived in (supermarkets, highways, and airports, for example). Augé ties this rise in non-places to supermodernity and its excess of information, acceleration of history, and multiplication of events. In other words, inhabitants of supermodernity do not have the time to deeply engage in their environments and create relationships with one another because they are hurrying through space in the most efficient manner. One classic illustration of this distinction between places and non-places occurs in the 1958 film by Jacques Tati, *Mon Oncle*. The architecture of modernity allows the characters in the film to live more efficiently, their appliances and automated spaces creating sterile environments that obey the needs of their users; however, this modernization comes at the price of no

longer feeling at home as one does in a more traditional environment that is less efficient but allows one the time to stop and talk with the neighbors and to forge an identity within a local culture.

La télévision suggests that the loss of connection to one's environment is directly attributable to television, as televised programming takes the place of direct engagement in one's local milieu. After noticing that several of the units in an apartment are filled with the flashing lights of the television, the narrator notes, "j'éprouvais à cette vue la même impression pénible de multitude et d'uniformité" (38). The inhabitants of the apartments are isolated, and each one appears absorbed by the same flickering lights of television programming. As Marc Augé writes, "The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude" (103). As evidenced by the protagonist's observation of the Schweinfurths, television viewing is tragic because it impedes telespectators from interacting with living, breathing people who may be as close in proximity as their own living room. Mr. and Mrs. Schweinfurth do not even acknowledge the visitors who enter their home, entranced as they are by the television (165). The blinds are closed, isolating the viewing area from the outside, and Mr. and Mrs. Schweinfurth seem to be completely unaware of social protocol: the only conversation between them and their visitors concerns the coffee service, and apart from this rudimentary exchange their attention is focused on the television set. The narrator is alarmed to realize that despite the Schweinfurths' gloomy, isolated, televisual absorption, a whole world lies outside their window: "je songeais avec effarement que nous étions dimanche matin, qu'il était un peu plus de neuf heures et qu'il faisait très beau" (168). The Schweinfurths are completely unaware of what is happening beyond the screen.

On the contrary, *La télévision* consistently emphasizes that choosing to engage in the world rather than being pacified by a screen can lead to the anthropological relationships characteristic of Augé's "places." Toussaint distinguishes *La télévision* from his previous novels by setting the story in real, anthropological places, all described from the point of view of a narrator who has chosen to focus his energy on the first-hand experience of his milieu. The narrator is constantly reminding his reader about where and when events occur, and each place he visits has its own aesthetic, from his neighbor's apartment to the crowded lawns at Halensee's Park (50-51). These are all places with a unique character and history. The Einstein Café, for example, is introduced by a long description that includes its origins: "[il] avait été au début du siècle la résidence privée d'une très grande actrice du cinéma muet" (113). The protagonist creates an ambience that

is unique to the location by pointing to its decoration, clientele, and food, all of them characterized by a unique German character. The Einstein Café and Halensee's Park are also both real places that can be visited in Berlin rather than generic imagined locations.

During his summer stay in Berlin, the protagonist enters into distinct relationships with the places he frequents. At his favorite Berlin pool, he describes the sense of connection to the other swimmers and the particular ambience of the pool in relation to the city:

“j'écarterais les bras parmi ces visages familiers, tel monsieur que j'avais perçu la veille, telle vieille dame dont je reconnaissais le bonnet fleuri avec une pointe de gratitude émue, petit îlot de stabilité, immuable et rassurant, au milieu de cette ville qui avait connu tant de bouleversements depuis, disons, les quatre-vingts dernières années” (138).

This is not an impersonal location that serves as a neutral backdrop for the story, but rather a unique place that affects the protagonist and creates an awareness of the history and people that surround him.

What makes this sense of place intriguing is the fact that so many of Toussaint's novels occur in “non-places”, the characters moving from one city to another without ever pointing to something that would be unique to that location, and passing through neutral zones such as gas stations, highways, and metro stops, all transitory and impersonal. In his article, “Navigating ‘Non-Lieux’ in Contemporary Fiction”, Emer O'Beirne notes a more general trend of French fiction writers evoking non-places to highlight the loss of meaning, identity, and community in the modern urban world. Protagonists move through spaces rather than inhabiting them, creating only ephemeral and impersonal connections to the world around them.

It may seem at first glance that for Toussaint's protagonist, Berlin is just another non-lieu: he is only staying there for a limited amount of time, has chosen the destination rather arbitrarily based on the availability of academic fellowships, and is there as an alienated outsider, not understanding the language and struggling to fit in. In his article, “La Mondo-Vision”, Alain-Philippe Durand mistakenly identifies the places in *La télévision* as generic, interchangeable non-places: “Le narrateur n'a que des rapports banals avec ces capitales [Paris, Berlin, Rome], qui finissent par se confondre, n'offrant rien de particulier” (536). However, Toussaint's descriptions of Berlin do evoke the feeling of a true place, one that stands in contrast to the cathodic mediation of experience that occurs in front of

the television set. What Durand does not recognize is that the places in *La télévision* are unlike the non-places of Toussaint's other novels, a thematic choice that serves to contrast the real life of community and history with the impersonal interactions of the television set.

CONCLUSION

Writing against a horizon of expectations defined by the fast-paced, alienating medium of television, Toussaint proposes instead the slow pleasures of leisure, focusing on the ordinary events of everyday life, recovering the senses, and reconnecting with one's local environment. The style of Toussaint's novel, which emphasizes slowness, perception, pleasure, and meditation on the narrator's immediate surroundings, stands in opposition to the aesthetic norm created by the television, and it is this opposition that Toussaint uses to challenge the reader's consciousness. Is the television indeed a pleasurable pastime? What is being sacrificed in the preference for television over other forms of entertainment?

In positioning the novel in televisual culture, Toussaint reflects the uncertainty of whether literature and art can recover from televisual hegemony. *La télévision's* protagonist does not convince any other character in the novel to give up television, seems reticent about his own academic pursuits, and in the end purchases a television set for his home. The fact that the protagonist studies Renaissance art and spends his time amid the archives of the library indicates that his interests have been relegated to an outdated past, quirky and interesting but not entirely relevant to popular culture. Though he makes a strong argument in favor of saving literature as an antidote to television's nefarious effects, Toussaint suggests that books are only embraced by the outsiders, those who have taken a step back from the mainstream.

And yet readers may favor this more ambiguous and comic approach, given that it avoids the condescending tone of some other televisual critiques that focus on the mentally numbing effect of the screen or the dichotomy between easy entertainment and the more edifying critical thinking inspired by art and literature. Toussaint recognizes that television is intertwined in the fabric of contemporary life, and that it isn't easy for anyone to avoid it. He also makes a seductive rather than dogmatic case for art and literature: we should reconnect to aesthetic experience because it is simply more pleasurable, and more human. Toussaint's novel suggests other aesthetic possibilities that counter the fast-paced yet deadening effects of television. It proposes what can be gained from slowing down the world and processing it at a human rate through the body rather than a television set.

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