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Fragmented Bodies and Mediated Identities

Two of Jean-Philippe Toussaint's novels, *Camera* and *Television*, are concerned with visual media representations, how they inform identity and how they misinform. The narrators of these novels are nameless, faceless men who seem to have no better sense of their own identity than what they offer the reader. The alienation and postmodern anxiety they suffer not only inhibits their work and isolates them from society, it also causes a division of the self and alienation from the body. As these characters seek comfort and cohesion in their fragmented worlds, the body becomes a place for reorientation, but the way that these characters experience their own bodies is subject to mediation and is inhibited by a mistrust of the senses. Both the narrators choose not to look, choose to disengage, turn off the TV, or throw away the camera, and rather than discovering their "true" reflection, they find themselves without a mirror.

According to Jean-Loise Hippolyte, Toussaint's fictional world is a fuzzy place where "what is *normal* functions paraxially with the *abnormal*, leaving the reader with a vague feeling of estrangement, but one that does not hinge on anything specific in the narrator's odd behavior" (Hippolyte 26). This "fuzziness" extends beyond actions and thoughts to the physical world of the novels and the corporeal identity of the characters and the way that people are read is also being exposed and critiqued through physical descriptions that seem to focus on insignificant details.

The narrators of both *Television* and *Camera* provide the reader with precise descriptions of clothing, often down to the detail of fabric and the way the clothes are worn, but rarely do they describe faces. As Hippolyte points out, these characters do not provide the psychological complexity or depth for easy reader identification, instead the protagonists “fulfill a subversive role, one that frustrates the reader’s expectations” by keeping the characters “vague and always (partially) out of site” (48). This is true for their bodies and even their faces as well as their feelings and motivations.

What little physical intimacy is shared with the characters is most often through an awkward revealing of something that peeks through the clothing or should be hidden or unnoticed. In *Camera*, while never describing the of the face of Il Signore Gambini, the narrator shares details of the “little hairs in his nose” (20) and the “remarkable contracted” nail on his big toe when he removes his sock (19). In *Television* characters are similarly describe in terms of clothing, adornments, or through intimate details of their naked bodies. In Halensee Park he plays with the “rules of urban vestimentary convention” by contrasting the “women with elegant hats” and gentlemen “with a scarf around their necks” with the “little slitted rut” of a young nude woman and a sunbather’s “member lolling to one side” (33-36). All this while he removes his own clothing piece-by-piece trying to reconcile his own imaginary, fragmented self with the definitive form of his naked body. In this way the narrators are also subverting the way we read people and how we identify with their image by providing strange extreme accounts that are either very removed or uncomfortably intimate.

This reveals the strained relationship between the narrators and the human body, even their own. Because they feel estranged from their own corporeality, Toussaint’s characters are constantly reassuring themselves through touching and looking at their own bodies. This act of

examining oneself with the eyes or with the hands is simultaneously soothing and unnerving as it serves to reestablish a connection with the self while creating a division. To touch an arm with a hand is to assume independence between the two. When the narrator of *Camera* pensively rubs a thigh, or the narrator of *Television* takes a visual inventory of naked body, each is fragmenting his own body and giving sensory authority to his hands and his eyes. These acts also fail to reassure also because both these narrators, especially in *Television*, have learned to distrust their own senses by being inundated with the aural and visual “illusion offered by television when it represents reality” (6).

As Warren Motte explains, when looking at a transmitted image, “the critic finds himself distanced from his object of study, seeing it only in heavily mediated form, through a glass, darkly” (183). This is true when the narrator of *Television* looks at a painting through a monitor, but it is also true when the object of study is the self. In a world that is constantly inundated with aural and visual stimuli, the relationship with one’s own identity can be muddled and the senses themselves over stimulated.

Communion with the body and synthesis of mind and body occurs in both novels during times of sensory deprivation. As in *The Bathroom*, the narrator of *Camera* frequently seeks isolated spaces, such as bathroom stalls, in which the freedom of bodily function and the lack of other stimuli he finds conducive to thought. When he and Pascale have sex, they are both asleep and “feeling around blindly,” not waking until after he ejaculates (75). In *Television* the narrator retreats to the swimming pool, which serves as an isolation tank where he can finally escape the noise of the world and, focusing on his body, enjoy “coordinated and synchronized movement” (4). Sex also brings him “immense inner equilibrium” and the same “bodily plentitude” as swimming, which he experiences lying “dreamily” on his back after the deed (4).

The narrator in *Camera* avoids obtaining proper photos for identification appears to be stuck in a regressive, infantile stage unable to fully develop his ego because he rejects his own representational image. The only images he has of himself are pictures from childhood, which he admits are not useful as they are not proof of adult identity. He claims that his refusal to act quickly is simply his method in the “struggle with reality” (13). In this struggle he is also fighting against a definitive form of his own identity. He uses the metaphor of wearing down an olive before stabbing it with a fork to describe this method, but as he works over the olive with his fork, he is simultaneously rubbing his shoeless feet together, working over his body as he does the olive.

Frequently throughout *Camera* the absence of images is felt. Of course, there are the missing photos he needs for his application as well as the empty projection screen in that he sits in front of in the driver’s registry. Even when he does use a mirror to shave in the gas station office, he has to stand on his toes to reach it and describes only Pascale, whom he can see in the top of the mirror, and the attendant, whom he can see in the bottom, but never his own reflection (54-56).

Camera presents an absence of image while *Television* presents an almost constant stream of visual and aural transmissions, despite the fact that the narrator has vowed to quit watching TV. Unlike the narrator of *Camera* who seems to be struggling against the reality of a definitive self, the narrator of *Television* is seeking a communion with the body. He does this through swimming, tai chi and a reconnection with the mother through his pregnant wife. Tai chi also serves to establish a connection with his own mother as she is a devotee herself and he claims during his own practice that he “must have looked just like mother” (42). Many of these

moments he compares to “work” and he uses the peace of mind he gets to turn his imagination towards the monograph he is writing.

Building his monograph is also a metaphor for developing a complete sense of self. It requires reflection and meditation, but it also requires research. His monograph, if and when he finishes it, will be built upon the previous work of others and will be about another man’s work, a body of work that consist of representational images, but which in themselves contain a locality and textuality like a living being. When he lies naked in the park he closes his eyes and reflects upon his own work and other artists’ work as a method of finding “purity of their eternal forms” (51). He lies with *one hand on his thigh* and “the other lying free” in the grass (51) and follows the flow of his “incomplete, scattered, unformed...gestating” thoughts which he had “only to put into their definitive form” (52). This describes his writing process, but can easily be applied to his development of identity.

He does still have moments when he happily retreats to world that is symbolic and imaginary. When he visits his vacationing neighbor’s home to water their plants—a task he manages to avoid despite the hours spent in their apartment—he explores their belongings, which he sexualizes, with a child-like libidinal curiosity. He puts on the man’s dressing gown and smells the woman’s negligee, he fingers the moist soil of the woman’s prized fern, and he plays with the rubber foreskin on the kitchen faucet (19-23). Significantly, this is also the place were he decides to let himself continue to watch TV, since it is distanced from his own living and working space.

In this scene as well as in the descriptions of characters, clothes (in this case, the dressing gown and negligee) serve as a surrogate for the body and seem to contain a life of their own. The narrator even includes clothing in an inventory of “living” things—“flesh or hair, fabric or

drapery” (6). Tactile objects are by nature better representations of reality, according to the narrator. While TV presents a representation of reality that “seems at first glance more trustworthy, authentic and credible” than that of painters, the narrator argues that paintings are better representations of reality because they themselves are *real*, they have locality and texture.

However, clothing can also serve as a false representation and intermediary between the body and one’s perception of the body. In both novels, many moments of intimacy are similarly mediated, often using envelopes as tools of abstraction. In *Camera* the first intimate moment that narrator shares with Pascale is digging through her purse and finding a pap smear contained in an envelope (24), later he carries around the clear blue envelope that contains the pictures of the unknown couple, which he describes as “an intimacy to which I should never have had access” (104). In *Television* the narrator gains access to his distant son through drawings sent to him in a padded envelope from his wife in Italy and finally, when watches a man in the museum approach a painting, he imagines him “merging with himself and gradually re-entering his corporeal envelope” (143). In this last example, the surrogate envelope is finally replaced by the body.

The ability of painting to help one remerge with himself is contrasted to TV’s alienation and reveals a suspicion for images that are without particular locality and without texture. Despite the “three million rainbow-hued points of light that define them” on the TV monitor, the narrator cannot tell one anchorman from another and describes the anchorman as only “bespectacled” (73). Simply by closing his eyes, though he can recall the distinct physical features of the painting of Charles V. He does not need to *see* the painting, but he does need to be sure of its locality in order to experience it.

The narrator distrusts the abstracted and de-contextualized image presented by the TV partly because of its technological aspect. He frequently contrasts the natural movement of

swimming with mechanical function of the television. By watching multiple sets while listening to others, each turned to different stations, he experiences a fragmentation of the senses and a false, mechanical sense of movement:

My eyes and ears thus disconnected by these perfectly contradictory programs
I continued to change channels, letting my gaze wander over the buildings across the way. More or less mechanically, passing from one screen to the next...this really was exactly how television presents the world to us everyday; speciously, enjoyable only if we give up three of the five senses we ordinarily use to see it as it is (124).

Television isn't only presenting the world in de-contextualized excerpts; it is hijacking the senses, fragmenting human experience and mechanizing the body.

This presents the fear that human beings can be overcome by the technology they create. Even by an unintelligent technology like TV, which is like an empty shell, an envelope, vacuous, though giving the appearance of containing all the complexities of life, the "purely mechanical result of an uninhabited technology" (6). Anxiety over the increasing role of technology in modern life is illustrated in both *Camera* and *Television*. Each contains scenes with post-apocalyptic, dystopian tones where humanity is almost entirely absent in a cold and deserted cityscape.

In *Camera*, on the way to the metro station, the group takes a wrong turn and finds itself in an unfamiliar neighborhood with "impersonal and cold architecture" and the "grayness of an industrial zone" full of isolated buildings with darkened windows and a "deserted restaurant with a terrace in a state of neglect" (57-58). While in *Television*, again next to a station, the narrator and his friend find themselves in an "utterly deserted urban wasteland" (118) where he will find

that all the inhabitants are at home glued to their TV sets as though they were assimilated cyborgs.

When he accepts an invitation for a plane ride over Berlin, he finds himself flying through the air around the TV transmitter. Up among the television waves he grasps the seat in front of him and plants his feet firmly on the floor of the plane, trying to “retain some sensation of terra firma”(130). Of course, being in a plane, this is a false sense of grounding. Just as, when he watches TV he describes the experience ironically as “just being myself,” lying content and comfortable, “hand cradling my privates” (2). Grabbing hold of himself in a similar attempt to “ground” himself within his own body, but this too is a false sense of grounding as he is really participating in the fragmentation of the senses while again adrift among the transmission waves.

. The turning point for the narrator is in the museum of paintings when, through a security monitor, he imagines the man reentering his “corporeal envelope.” The physical, tactile art of the painting creates a moment of reorientation within the body through a communion with the physical and the local in the form of representational art. The narrator is still distanced from this moment, seeing it only on the TV monitors and able to access the painting this man is approaching only through his own memory. Even within his memory, he experiences the painting as a moment of communion with locality and physicality—a moment which inspired a *true* identification, not dependent upon the mediation of technology or clothing or accessories that signify a false sense of self.

Unlike the image that he describes early in the novel as “a rather true one,” which still provides little description of features (only his coffee in hand and his movement) and is obscured by a “half-lit hallway” (25), his memory of the painting provides the first real descriptive account of a human face, “chin covered by a light beard...face smooth and young...forehead pale, almost

white, skin slightly scaly...” without mention of clothing or mannerism, and it is this face which then melds with the narrator’s own image when he opens his eyes and sees his own reflection on the monitor screen(144). This creates a connection between the narrator, the painting and the image of the man reentering his “corporeal envelope.”

In *Camera*, the narrator fails to capture his own image. The pictures he takes of himself with the stolen camera are underexposed and reveal only “imperceptible traces of (his) absence” (101). The novel ends with him isolated in a phone booth, trapped on all sides by absence of image, by transparent glass that offers no reflection. Here he imagines an identical, parallel life (like a mirror image of the world) in which nothing is wounded and everything is “undefined” and flowing “in a calm, sweet flux” (109). In the end, though, he tries to pin point it in his mind, “as with the tip of a needle one immobilizes the moving body of a living butterfly” (110), inflicting a wound upon it and effectively destroying it.

In each of these novels the reader still feels the absence of a clear, representational image of the narrator and, like the narrator of *Camera* we never capture a clear picture of him, but maybe like the narrator of *Television* we can feel satisfied that we experienced something real, something living in the tactile pages of the book Perhaps this is exactly why the reader with little suspicion or anxiety can so easily close his own eyes and see himself reflected in these faceless men.

Works Cited

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