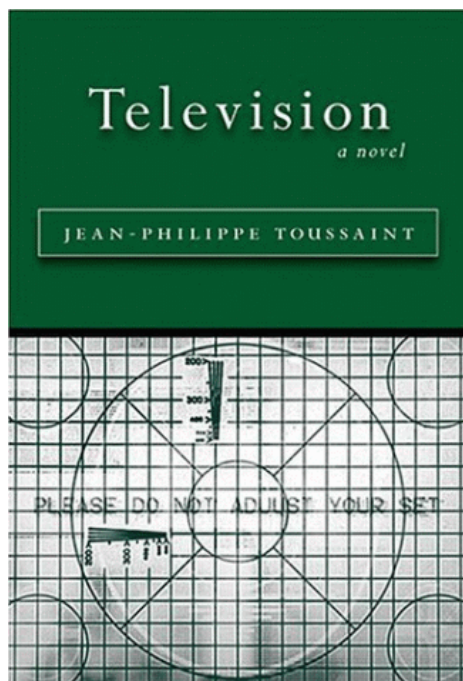


[TELEVISION by jean-philippe toussaint](#)

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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 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 (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.

buy it [from the publisher](#) or pick it up [from your local library](#).



via dalkey's [BEST EUROPEAN FICTION 2010](#), you can read [toussaint's "Zidane's Melancholy" here](#) along with an [interview with toussaint from it here](#).



and, in english, an [interview with toussaint by KCRW's silverblatt here](#).

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