

# Colin Marshall

## The War on Mediocrity

December 16, 2010

### Jean-Philippe Toussaint: Television

I've chosen Jean-Philippe Toussaint as the subject of my next contemporary novelist primer for The Millions; think of these posts on his individual novels as preparatory notes. My first long-form encounter with the man came in the form of an interview on Bookworm, the radio show that has introduced me to so many authors and asked so little in return. (PROTIP: Whenever you see a name you don't know come up on that show, listen to the interview immediately.) I couldn't tell you exactly why the conversation between he and (former Marketplace of Ideas guest) Michael Silverblatt so captivated me, but it surely had to do with their description of a scene where a Toussaint protagonist, on a train to Beijing in the middle of the night, readies himself for unexpected sweet restroom love with a Chinese girl he met the day before just as his hated cellphone rings, bearing a call from his on-again-off-again French girlfriend announcing that her father has drowned.

That bit comes from *Running Away*, which I just finished, but I began my voyage through the Toussaint *oeuvre* with *Television*, which seems best known among his Anglophone readership. Its nameless hero — a Toussaint specialty, I've learned, and one I always enjoy — ambles around Berlin, supposedly on some sort of academic sabbatical to write a book about Titian. He normally lives in France and has just seen his wife and son off on a mini-vacation to Italy, relegating himself to the company of his computer's blinking cursor.

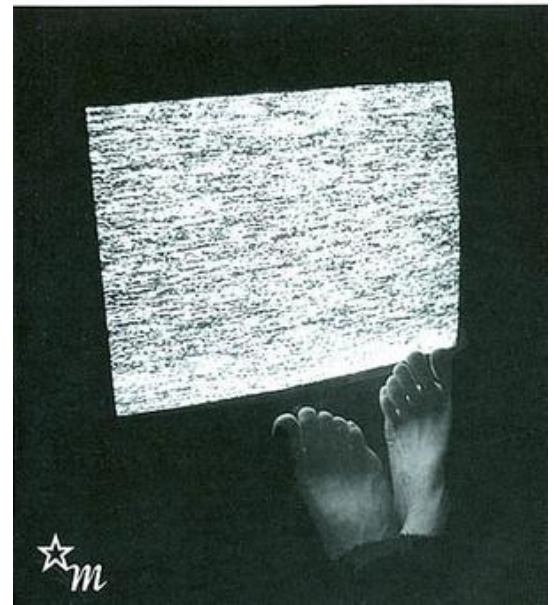
Displacement? Check. Isolation? Check. Realizing how lazy his increasingly expansive television-watching schedule has made him, he's decided to quit that habit cold-turkey, which both reduces and intensifies that isolation.

Despite the high number of words here *about* television — its nature, its effects, the measures needed to effect its absence, and the effects of that absence — I didn't feel television itself taking on a particularly looming presence. Is this because television has no presence of any kind, much less a looming one, in my own life? I haven't regularly watched television in nearly a decade; I haven't even owned one. This came less out of addiction to it than boredom with it; it's not that I took a long, hard look at myself laying around in pajamas staring at all-day Tour de France coverage like *Television's* protagonist does, but that I couldn't find anything good on.

I guess that, when Toussaint wrote this novel in 1997, television was a more maliciously all-consuming sort of force. I think back to David Foster Wallace's 1990 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" which, among its many threads, talks about the ill effects of television's primary purpose: to hold just enough of the viewer's attention to keep him from turning it off. I buy that, though this seems less sinister than just totally unappealing. Our French art historian recalls a habit of "turning on the TV in the evening and watching everything there was to see, my mind perfectly empty, never choosing any particular program, simply watching everything that came my way, the movement, the glimmering lights, the

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variety.” Or, here is David Sedaris:

To say that you did not believe in television was different from saying that you did not care for it. Belief implied that television had a master plan and that you were against it. It also suggested that you thought too much. When my mother reported that Mr. Tomkey did not believe in television, my father said, "Well, good for him. I don't know that I believe in it, either."

"That's exactly how I feel," my mother said, and then my parents watched the news, and whatever came on after the news.

The task of not watching television, which almost completely eclipses the task of writing about Titian, forces the protagonist to bounce from vignette to mildly weird Berlin vignette. He wanders a museum, contemplating most intently its televisual bank of security monitors. He cautiously climbs out his neighbors' bathroom window into their kitchen window in order to remove their fern from the refrigerator before they notice he put it there in the first place. He sits in for a psychiatrist friend, counseling his patients for same-day cash. He sees an episode of *Baywatch* (long a German favorite) playing in the distant window of another building while he hears its sound coming from the set in a nearby room. In a sequence of especially inexplicable beauty, he looks out at Berlin from the cramped cockpit of a small plane piloted by one of his academic buddy's students, a sullen girl, quite possibly hung over, with a penchant for flying as closely over buildings as possible.

Call this fragmentation, call it pointillism; I like stories told this way. In fact, they're barely stories; they're *fabrics*. Dalkey Archive's press materials compare Toussaint's novels to the films of Jim Jarmusch and Jacques Tati. I can't call that inaccurate, in the sense that both directors' work deals similarly with individuals drifting through, and failing to understand, complicated systems. But the filmmaker *Television* really gets me thinking about is Chris Marker; the detached, clear voice of *Sans Soleil* and the like make the world interesting in the same way Toussaint's prose does. Marker is French, Toussaint Belgian; could this be a strain in the Francophone cultural sensibility — one of the very few — that taps straight into my preferences? If so, that must be why I've started to feel twinges of urgency about getting better acquainted with those cultures.

In the *NYT*, Joy Press calls the Toussaint form "spare novellas bounded by odd, self-imposed limitations." This literary form has recently come to fire me up more than any other. Is that because it's an analog for what I want to do in media in general: clear, clean, and driven by unconventional rules? It also dovetails with the appeal of what I call "life experiments," which are nothing but "self-imposed limitations" one places upon one's own actions — like, say, quitting television. The union of these concepts pleases me immensely; after all, I'm the one who won't be satisfied until life and work merge inextricably, and likely not even then.

(Another point of convergence between Toussaint and I: he says he can't write at home, preferring to do it in coffee shops instead. No wonder I'm excited to get to the rest of the guy's work.)

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