

Danny Yee's Book Reviews

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Television: A Novel

Jean-Philippe Toussaint

translated from the French by Jordan Stump

Dalkey Archive Press 2004

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Our narrator is an academic on sabbatical in Berlin, working on a book on Titian and Charles V, who decides to give up watching television when his wife and son go to Italy on holiday. His story contains elements of a polemic against television —

"In the meantime, I spent hours every evening motionless before the screen, my gaze fixed, bathed in the ever-shifting light of the scene changes, gradually submerged by the flood of images illuminating my face, the long parade of images blindly addressed to everyone at once and no one in particular, each channel being only another strand in the vast web of electromagnetic waves daily crashing down over the world. Powerless to react, I nevertheless understood full well that I was debasing myself in these long sessions before the screen, unable to drop the remote, mechanically and frenetically changing channels in a quest for sordid and immediate pleasures, swept up in that vain inertia, that insatiable spiral, searching for ever more vileness, still more sadness."

- but this is just one of the strands of *Television*. The narrator describes a laid-back life, highlighting unconnected and slightly out of the ordinary events that turn out to be perfectly ordinary: some neighbours go away and leave him insanely detailed instructions for watering their plants; he makes a visit to a nudist park; he takes a flight over Berlin in a light aircraft; he visits the art gallery where he likes to sit and work on his book; and so forth. His expert procrastination continues throughout: unable to decide whether to refer to his subject as Titian, le Titien, Vecelli, Vecellio or combinations thereof, he completes just two words of his book. And giving up television only leads to an increasing obsession with it...

There is nothing heroic about any of this, but it makes us see ordinary objects and events in a different way. The self-centred narrator's foibles and failings are refreshingly human, and his flat and seemingly objective presentation adds to the comic effect. *Television* is an entertainingly funny short novel.

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