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The aesthetics of the ludic in Jean-Philippe Toussaint's novel *Camera*:

A comparative study with methods of XVII century French 'romans comiques'

Charles Sorel's *Histoire Comique de Francion* (1623-1633), Paul Scarron's *Le Roman Comique* (1651-1660) and Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *Camera* (1988) offer similar compositional strategies centering on the realm of play. In contrast to the traditional novels of their respective time, the methods developed in the three novels expose a new poetic of the ludic. This study will focus on comparing the derisory style, but most importantly, demonstrate how the novels commonly attempt to create a more pertinent image of the self and a new way to think about the experience of being.

To achieve this goal, I have organized my paper into four main sections. In the first three sections, I compare the three novels narrative structure, lack of formal unity and their seemingly improvised plots. Each section will demonstrate how Sorel, Scarron and Toussaint achieve a new literary perspective by mischievously playing with the purpose and manner of the narrative. I end my paper with by examining how these methods allow

for a wider philosophical outlook on

Before I begin the comparative study I will provide a brief overview of how the novels contrast to the traditional prose fiction of their respective time. In explaining how Sorel's novel *Roman Comique*'s differs from its contemporaries, Serroy gives a good overview of the literary expectations in seventeenth-century French prose fiction:

Le roman Comique se présente, ainsi, au XVII siècle, comme un laboratoire où s'expérimentent les formules les plus originales: prenant ouvertement ses distances avec les formules établies du roman pastoral, héroïque ou précieux, lesquelles, liées à des règles, ne bougent guère, il pousse toujours plus loin sa réflexion ``sur lui-même.

Likewise, in his study of Toussaint's novels in his book *Fuzzy Fiction*, Jean-Louis Hippolyte explains how Toussaint's literary aesthetics differentiate him from his contemporaries as he: "questions literature's position with relation to the New Novel, more especially the relevance of the concepts of 'experimental literature' and the 'avant-garde'" (25).

Sarcasm and irreverence of is one of the ways Scarron, Sorel and Toussaint's develop their comedic style. Indeed, each novel commonly relies on a playful narrative technique at the expense of the reader. In his work, Sorel parodies the tendencies of the epic

novel by basing his novel on similar conventions but never fully delivering these expectations. Instead he focuses on the truth of observation. Sorel explains the origins of his novel in the following terms:

Je n'ay point trouvé de remede plus aysé ny plus salulaire à l'ennuy qui m'affligeoit il y a quelque temps que de m'amuser à descrire une histoire qui tinst davantade du folastre que du serieux, de maniere qu'une melancolique cause a produit un facetieux effect (Sorel, 45).

Similarly, Toussaint was very aware of that he was making an assertion against accepted ideals and convention similarly and acknowledges his calculated irreverence in the following terms:

L'Appareil-photo est un livre à la fois très sérieux et très désinvolte. Il n'y a jamais eu dans mes livres un tel grand écart entre le prosaïque et l'élevé, entre, d'un cote, l'aspect provocateur et je-m'en-foutiste du narrateur, et d'autre part, les réflexions philosophiques et métaphysiques sur la pensée et le passage du temps que le livre contient.

One of the methods the authors achieve this balance of mocking accepted literary genres while conveying a deeper meaning than comedic relief is by commonly using a method of superimposing the narrator's voice to the novel's storyline.

Both Scarron and Sorel employ a narrative structural technique which capriciously

interrupts the narrative recital - as authors, not protagonists – to comment on the story’s development. This point is made clearly when Sorel introduces Françion, the novel’s main character and, while describing a piece of skin dangling from his nose, interjects to inform the reader that: “Je ne suis pas assuré qu’elle fust pleine des choses que naturellement elle devoit avoir: mais je sçay bien qu’il la frota une demie heure” (Sorel, 54). By interrupting the narrative course Sorel manages to impose his thoughts on that physical attribute while never actually divulging information pertaining to the narrative plot.

Likewise, Scarron employs this technique even more often, affirming his unquestionable control over the novel and the readers. In the process of introducing one of the many characters, Scarron interrupts his description to inform us that: “J’oubliais à vous dire que je crois qu’il se lava la bouche car j’ai su qu’il avait grand soin de ses dents” (Scarron, 95). Another example is when he states with even more irreverence at the beginning of chapter XIV, entitled “Enlèvement du curé de Domfront”: “Ceux qui auront eu assez de temps à perdre pour l’avoir employé à lire les chapitres précédents doivent savoir, s’ils ne l’ont oublié, que le curé Domfront était dans l’un des brancards(...)” (Scarron, 133). By this practice, Sorel is not only affirming complete control over his novel, but also mocking the importance and purpose of fictional prose.

In *Camera*, Toussaint also employs this divisive method though the use of parentheses. Dispersed throughout the novel, the parentheses express the protagonist’s

personal thoughts. These thoughts are often impertinent and judgmental or simply inform the reader of mundane and irrelevant details to the story. For example, when recalling his meeting with Il Signore Gamibini, the driving school instructor, the protagonist's is kind enough to inform the reader that "(il avait des poils dans le nez, je remarquai)" (Toussaint, 22). A detail of no relevance to the plot apart from forcing the reader to crawl deeper in the protagonist's perplexing mind. Another example which demonstrates Toussaint's subtle and refined spirit of play is when the protagonist shares a ride with M. Polougaïevski in his brand new rental car, at which point the reader is informed through the parenthesis that "(il l'avait loué en attendant de récupérer sa triomphe)" (Toussaint, 79). This information once again holds no significance to the plot but the added detail of the brand of his old car, a 'triomphe', makes it feel much more important than it is. This information makes the plot a ridiculous situation and the fact that he shared his thought with the reader to begin with.

In each instance, Scarron, Sorel and Toussaint use this narrative technique as a means to hinder the flow of the novel and to further reinforce the idea that they, as authors, have the ability to manipulate the reader and throw off the expectations of the novel's Romanesque course. Sheringham concurs with the goal of this method when, comparing Toussaint to Oster, he explains that the "narrating voices devised by these writers constantly deflect reading from narrative ends, frequently offering highly detailed explanations and depictions of very ordinary actions and perceptions".

The result of structuring a narrative around digressions, a “roman du romancier”, creates a common lack of linearity and continuity in the novels. In fictional prose, a reader tends to expect a certain chronological development of fictional plots. Through this narrative ploy, the authors emphasize the improvisation, a literary style which further demonstrates the theatrics of the novels; where games are played for the sake of entertainment. In *Françion*, the reader is subjugated to a dispersion of the storyline with no obvious focal point or apparent ‘maturation’. When reading these novels, the reader can practically see the canny smile on Sorrel’s face as he astutely orchestrates his narrative with unrestricted freedom, relishing in the role of puppeteer at the expense of the reader. *Le Roman Comique* mirrors these games as Scarron creates a succession of sketches, which, if isolated, would bear no particular value. These episodes resemble tricks pulled out of a hat on whim. In Toussaint’s case, this feeling of literary improvisation can be explained by his intentional casual approach to his creative process. Toussaint’s creative process is explained in the following terms:

Quand j’écris, je ne sais pas où je vais, j’avance en
écrivain, j’écris une page, puis deux, puis je les retravaille, puis j’écris trois
pages, et jamais plus, je n’avance jamais sans être sûr de mes bases. Donc
c’est par le style que naît une histoire, un personnage.

This underlying sense of improvisation and casualness enhances the literary irreverence in *Camera* and further destabilizes the reader’s expectations. Hippolyte defines Toussaint’s

literary world as being: “deceptively simple, unpredictable, as seen through the eyes of a Pascalian observer, wedged between action and inaction (25). Hence, Toussaint creates a narrative environment where the reader is forced to re-question his/her anticipations and as such his/her role as an active reader. In their own way, these works force the reader to reevaluate their relationship to a novel and to broaden the inquiry to the social context.

In addition to the absence of formal unity, *Histoire Comique* and *Camera* also share a common lack of apparent thematic concerns, and if they do have one, it is principally developed for satire. If asked to summarize the story plot of these three novels it becomes apparent that this task is challenging as the reader does not have clear instructions on which event holds more importance. In *Histoire Comique*, the plot revolves around the chaotic and burlesque world of a theatre group and is mostly filled with gags and random sketches and where a chapter is entitled: “Chapitre V – Qui ne contient pas grand chose”(74). While aiming to represent different aspects of the banal and mundane, the reader follows the sometimes extravagant (extravagant in its mix of naivety and facetiousness) but failed adventures this theatre group. In the case of *Francion*, the plot is more Romanesque in form and follows the adventures of *Francion*, his childhood years in school, his travels, his encounters, none of which hold more importance over the next and serves as a means to parody the adventure and pastoral novels of its time. In *Camera* the novel’s principal plot is concerned with a man trying to obtain a driver’s license, falling in

love, stealing a camera. In an interview, Toussaint confirms the difficult balance he achieved, both imposing an authoritative declaration while managing to say nothing at all in *Camera's* opening paragraph:

C'est très radical, comme incipit, c'est vraiment se foutre du monde. Je suis un écrivain de trente ans qui dit: "Ce que je vais vous raconter n'a aucun intérêt." En d'autres termes: "Je vais me foutre de votre gueule." C'est très impertinent, comme début de roman(135).

Toussaint explains that in his first paragraph he successfully manages to both capture the aesthetics of the entire novel: the unveiling of his world of amusement with an undertone that forces the reader to pose a series of questions pertaining to life and its inescapable end. In fact, throughout *Camera*, Toussaint plays with a juxtaposition of contradictory effects. The plot development revolves around events, which hold no narrative suspense to them (pedicure, driving license lessons, telephone ringing, filling a gas tank) and mostly by complete coincidence (he walks by the office, the phone rings, boy comes over...). The details revealed are overbearingly insignificant and yet impose on the reader private information (olive picks, feet callus, childhood pictures, pap smear...). The locations where the sketches take place are all set in the real world, often described in detail (supermarket, school courtyard, gas station, ferry boat), whereas the reader is still awaiting information on the protagonists, the woman he loves etc. Through the novel's juxtapositions and oppositions, Toussaint exposes the absurdity of life and imposes his

derisory imprint. Taylor explains Toussaint's unique balancing act: "In Toussaint, everything depends on this "almost." Minor breaks in routine become moving because human action per se is depicted as fragile, ephemeral, absurd"(63).

Francion's adventures parallel *Camera* in that Sorel does not attempt to glamorize events, location or characters. In fact he "countered the improbability of the romances with the commonplace, often vulgar, and scabrous realities of his own times". He also drowns his hero's adventures in everyday events. For example, he goes into detail about Francion's experience attending school as a young child and also juxtaposes the hardships he encounters (abusive teachers for example) to the terrible tasting foods he endured at school. By using this method, the reader has a hard time knowing what information holds the most importance. In addition, by constantly emphasizing the reality of the hero's experience (as it relates to bodily fluids and human needs) the novel loses its fictional façade and forces the reader to reevaluate the social context.

Indeed, the emphasis on realism in *Camera*, *Roman Comique* or *Francion* combined with the banality of the plot allows the protagonists to attentively observe their interactions, or lack thereof, with the outside world. In his study of the Minuit writers of the 1980s and 1990s, *Everyday Life*: Michael Sheringhan explains that this practice places the protagonists in "circumstances where they are disposed to pay attention to what is happening around them (...) they fill their novels with accounts of everyday objects like

cigarette lighters and vacuum cleaners, and mundane activities like driving a car or making a phone call”(347). In fact, a majority of the humor derives from the absurdity of the plot development as it showcases the scabrous realities of their time. In *Camera*, the protagonist randomly leaches onto Pascale’s life, a bored driver’s license office worker. The reasons he chooses to befriend her are never explained. With a complete lack of restraint, ‘sans-gêne’, the protagonist simply proceeds to invade this complete stranger’s life (expects to be waited on, goes and picks up her child at school) his lack of awareness of standard social procedures actually makes the reader uncomfortable. This practice, which aims at laughter, is clearly intentional and according to Joachim Ritter’s study on the relation of laughter to the social context:

“Il y a un rapport direct entre le comique et l’individualité. Le comique est un fait social. Il peut-être analysé, dans sa dimension sociale, comme la relation entre une norme et sa transgression. Des textes comiques donnent l’occasion de mettre en rapport, d’une part, les relations entre la norme et sa transgression et, de l’autre, celles entre la société et de l’individu”.

As demonstrated *Histoire Comique*, *Françon* and *Camera* similarly develop a world the world where the ludic is bountiful. But ultimately, what is the point? Is this solely a stylistic exercise? The novels irreverently mock the concept of seriousness by deliberately reacting to the solemn established novels of their time. However, are the authors just being

literary contrarians? Actually no. The absurdity of the universes created by Scarron, Sorel and Toussaint is not simply a comic method. It is also a social critique. Identifying with each character in these novels is a complex matter. The nature of these characters drives them to be independent, mostly unheroic, contemporary and painfully real. By disregarding the socially accepted norms of their respective society the protagonists exhibit a lightness of being, a naiveté which, in turn, exposes a realism, a truth of observation that makes the reader both uncomfortable and further unveils a discussion on human destiny. By reinventing the character's profoundly human relationships to their world, the reader is forced to examine the purpose of his own existence. In creating a plot based on incidental and seemingly improvised events, the authors expose the temporal and ephemeral nature of life and further uncover a quest of toward individual consciousness. Quoting Beckett, Toussaint himself explains: "Rien n'est plus drôle que le Malheur".

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For this study, all references to *Camera* will be from the original French text, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, L'Appareil-Photo, (Paris : Les Éditions de Minuits, 1988/2007). I will preclude from translating passages from Camera as Toussaint's aesthetic refinement is directly related his linguistic nuances.

Jean Serroy, Roman et réalité. Les histoires comiques au XVIIe siècle. (Paris: Minard, 1981), 17. For more on the foundations of this literary style see Nathalie Grande, Le Roman Français au 17e (Paris, Bréal, 2002).

This concept is further explored by George Saintsbury, A short history of French literature (from the earliest texts to the close of the nineteenth century), Seventh edition (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1917), 296.

Jean-Philippe Toussaint, "Pour un roman Infinitesimaliste - Interview Laurent Demoulin," Jean-Philippe Toussaint, L'Appareil-Photo (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2007), 133.

Christian Oster is a French novelist also published at Les Editions de Minuit.

Michael Sheringham, Everyday Life: theories and practices from surrealism to the present (n.d.), 347.

This term is used by Yves Giraud in his Préface to Scarron, 27.

A term coined by Roy C. Cladwell in his study of "Jean-Philippe Toussaint," The contemporary novel in France, ed. William Thompson (Gainesville: University Press Florida, 1995), 369.

Giraud calls this « tirer les ficelles », Roman Comique, 28. Toussaint himself in an interview confirms the joy he gets out of the writing process : «De toute façon, je rigole beaucoup en écrivant. » Jean-Philippe Toussaint, "Monsieur s'amuse," Les Inrouptibles 1992.

Jean-Philippe Toussaint, " Les Inrouptibles 1992.

Toussaint has admitted that it took him more than one month to write the first paragraph, a 14 line manifesto which needs to be read in its entirety to grasp its poetics and wit. Jean-Philippe Toussaint, L'Appareil-Photo (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1998/2007), see page 7.

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