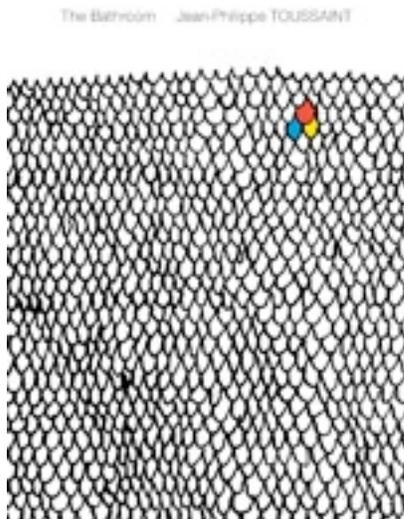


### **3:AM Magazine**

<http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/you-know-life-%E2%80%93-the-translated-novels-of-jean-philippe-toussaint/>

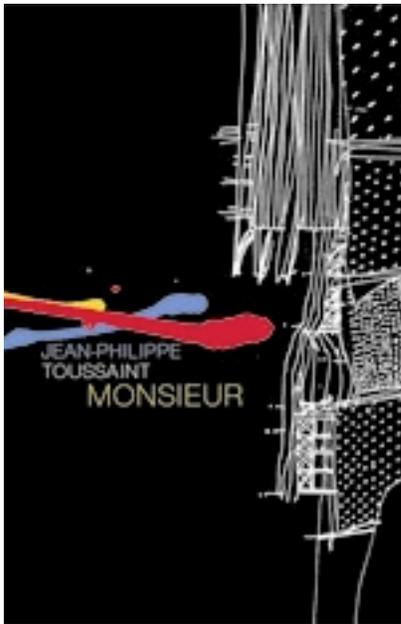
## **You Know, Life – The Translated Novels of Jean-Philippe Toussaint**

“Writing registers new forms of dramatic stress, of a self-referring kind: writing becomes the record of compulsions and resistances to write. (In the further extension of this view, writing itself becomes the writer’s subject.)” So argues Susan Sontag in her introduction to *A Roland Barthes Reader*. In [Jean-Philippe Toussaint](#)’s novel [Television](#), the narrator, after deciding to quit watching TV, going cold turkey on his compulsion to take part in the passive act of staring at the small screen – which he implicates as the cause of his non-writing – spends his time thinking about but never actually pursuing his would-be groundbreaking book on Titian. Apart from the opening words – “When Musset” – his work remains defiantly palimpsestual, the novel *Television* overwriting the “fictional” work on Titian Vecellio (TV). Toussaint’s novels create a “dramatic stress” in their striving to be, in the tensile force of the paragraphs, in the play between humour and significance, surface and depth, the infinite and the infinitesimal.



*L'appareil photo* published in France in 1988 by Les Éditions de Minuit (and as [Camera](#) by Dalkey Archive Press in 2008) is the fifth of Toussaint’s eight novels to be translated into English. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, “Far

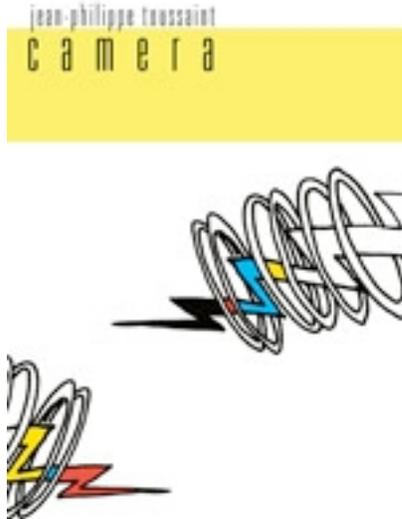
from being superficial, a great Frenchman has his superficialities to the extreme degree, a natural envelope which surrounds his depths” (*Dawn*). As a Belgian writing in French who calls himself a European, assumed into the contemporary cluster of novelists working beyond the “nouveau roman” – Jean Echenoz, Éric Chevillard, Marie Redonnet, and Marie Darrieussecq – Toussaint’s novels are concerned with the banalities of everyday life, the quiddity of objects, the psychological abrasions caused by humankind’s interaction with phenomena – the superficialities. To read *Camera* is to experience one long blink of the I, a movement from the light to darkness. In the words of [Mark Z. Danielewski](#), “photography [gives] permanence to moments that [are] often fleeting. Nevertheless, not even ten thousand photographs can secure a world” (*House of Leaves*).



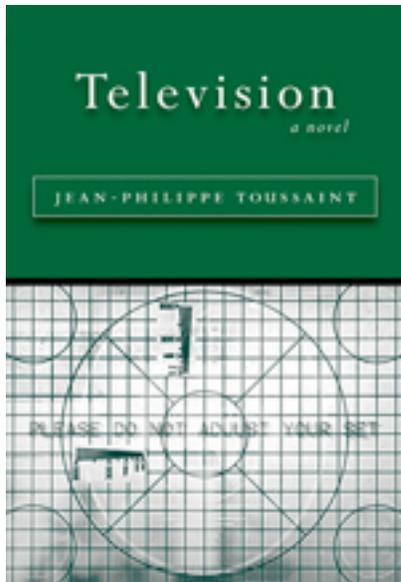
Who writes like Toussaint? And whom does Toussaint resemble? The latter, more easily approached, would include obvious Toussaint progenitors such as Samuel Beckett, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau, and Francis Ponge. Like Beckett’s characters, Toussaint’s nameless protagonists find humour in despondency. In *Television*, the scene in which the narrator attempts to hide the neglected fern he is supposedly looking after for his vacationing neighbours is a comic masterpiece. Beckett would have approved and so would have Buster Keaton, Jacques Tati, Miguel de Cervantes, and Herman Melville. With perfect comic timing, the fern becomes the narrator’s windmills, his pteridophytic Moby Dick. Toussaint’s intense gaze is reminiscent of the

*nouveau roman* writers; his playfulness evokes the works of the [Oulipo](#) group; while [Making Love](#) (*Faire l'amour*) and *Camera* suggest Blanchot's *Awaiting Oblivion*.

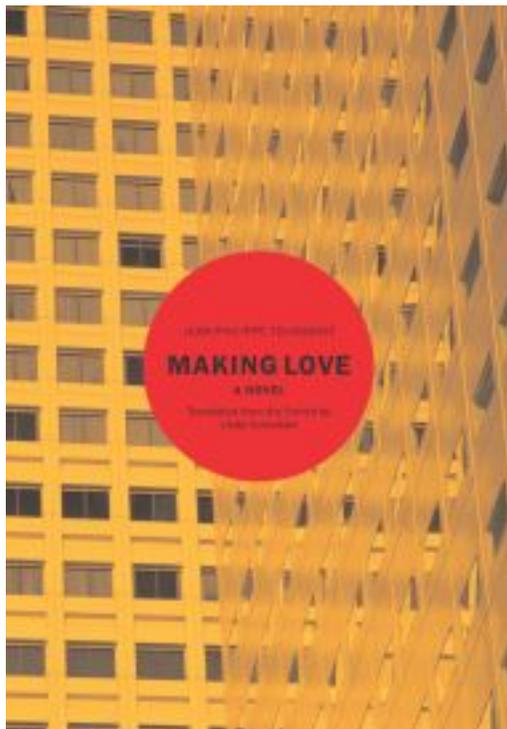
A contemporary of Toussaint, Nicholson Baker's first two novels – *Mezzanine* (1988) and *Room Temperature* (1990) – also explore the minutiae of existence, the anxiety of being, the relationship between the human and the plastic, between time and technology. Baker and Toussaint inhabit a world in which milk cartons, Instamatic cameras, and overnight bags are as significant as love, sex, and death. Few writers work in this way – maybe W.G. Sebald, [Ben Marcus](#), and the Patrick Süskind of *Pigeon* and *The Story of Mr. Sommer*.



Toussaint's signature literary dish is the paragraph. His sentences – short in the early works, more intricate, serpentine, and poetic in the later – create blocks of prose that, rather than dense and impenetrable, are light but rich, airy but flavoursome – a soufflé of introspection, reflection, and observation. Rather like Ponge's prose poems, Toussaint's paragraphs are responsive to the process of their own presence.



The narrative of *Camera* moves through sequences of action as thought – the narrator learns to drive, goes shopping – but he does so without consequence, without subsequence. The idea of the act is to think about the act in the process of doing. His actions and thoughts are synchronized. *Camera* is the reverse lens of Xavier de Maistre’s *A Journey Around My Room*. Toussaint’s works – autistic and present-at-hand – are the means by which he thinks the world, are his being-with.



Not much happens in the *nouveau roman*, but the narrative – charged with significance, however unapparent – forces the reader to acknowledge that something must be happening. In Toussaint’s novels (and in Baker’s early work) the narrators/characters withdraw from the action, hide away in a bathroom ([The Bathroom](#)), travel without seeing anything (*Camera*), refuse to take part in the spectacle (*Television*), and take on activities they have no intention of finishing ([Monsieur](#)). If the characters lack emotional depth, it is given to them by the objects they refute, desire, disdain – Toussaint’s metro maps, his “mustard container adorned with smurfs”, and his televisions replace wandering clouds, Grecian urns, and albatrosses. The properties of things penetrate the infinite responsibilities of being. That is, Toussaint’s characters repudiate action in preference to the plastic while simultaneously delaying and relaying their thoughts on doing. Objects – cameras, baths, and designer clothes – reflect an apparition of the (apparently motiveless) self.

In his [review](#) for *The New York Times*, [Tom McCarthy](#) asserts: “that *Camera* should have waited 20 years to find an English-language publisher is scandalous.” Indeed. [Dalkey Archive](#) has published four of Toussaint’s novels: *Television*, *Monsieur*, *The Bathroom*, and *Camera* and is to publish a translation of *Fuir* (set in China) sometime in 2010. *Making Love*, a love story set in Tokyo and Kyoto, is published by [The New Press](#). Toussaint’s novels, in direct language belying an embedded poetry, interrogate the (de)real with precision, deftness, and humour. (There’s a potential PhD thesis here: *Toussaint, Heidegger, and the Uncanny*.) Infinitesimal gems to read and re-read.

#### **ABOUT THE ANALYST**

[Steve Finbow](#)’s novel *Balzac of the Badlands* will be published by [Future Fiction London](#) in October 2009.

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