

# The Intimacy of Estrangement: Technology Ennui and the Fragmented Consumer in the works of Jean Philippe Toussaint

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## Abstract

The present paper will study the relationship between man and technology in the contemporary, digitized, consumerist society in the literary works of the Belgian author Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Through an analysis of his selected novels – *Television* and *Running Away* – the paper will explore how everyday technologies and gadgets such as television, mobile phones become an extension of the self, how these objects occupy the minds of the consumers, and how they shape identity and impact social interaction. On one hand, the characters inhabit physical spaces cluttered with gadgets; on the other hand, their psychological space is marked by detachment, disorientation and ennui. The paper argues that the author's portrayal of technological consumption uncovers an ambivalence – while modern technology offers connection and communication, it fosters isolation and alienation of an individual from the society, eventually leading to a larger question of existential lethargy. By situating Toussaint's work within the broader context of postmodern literature and critical theory on consumerism, this paper deliberates upon the extent to which digital consumption has influenced and acted upon its consumers in the age of overconsumption and technological dependence.

**Keywords:** Consumerism, Alienation, Technology, Digital Society, Ennui

## INTRODUCTION

We live in a period of post-industrialization, postmodern and consumerist society. The present society is a digitized, mechanized and numerical world where a series of numbers becomes our identification, for instance, our mobile number, PAN number and Aadhaar number. In a society of automatic action and reaction, it is only natural that theoreticians, thinkers and writers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Fredric Jameson and Jean-Philippe Toussaint have been preoccupied by this particular subject. Today is the age of smart phones, television, video games, Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, and bionics, to name a few. In his poem "Television", the British novelist Roald Dahl writes:

"It rots the sense in the head!  
It kills imagination dead!  
It clogs and clutters up the mind!  
It makes a child so dull and blind!  
He can no longer understand  
A fantasy, a fairyland!"

His brain becomes as soft as cheese!

His power of thinking rust and freeze!

He cannot think – he only sees!”

Television is a device which has been worked on, used, discussed and studied by researchers, thinkers and writers. Before computer and the Internet came along, television used to be the more popular means of contact with the outside world. It has been our eyes and ears and most importantly, a witness to the changes in the society vis-à-vis science and technology. The voices from the big and bulky television set, the rings of the telephone, the songs playing on the radio – it has been a noisy turn of century after all.

### Research Question and Methodology

According to Bernard Stiegler, a French philosopher, we live in a “société hyper-industrielle, where every individual is essentially a consumer”(Stiegler 2015). As consumers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the choicest of merchandise are just a click of a button away. In resonance with the thoughts of Roald Dahl on television, literature has encountered similar responses and reactions to the burgeoning impact that technology has in the society. We live in a new regime of ‘technological colonization’.

Here, the works of contemporary writers such as Jean-Philippe Toussaint becomes an important reference point. In his writings, one finds a portrayal of the present digitized, numerical society of today. The Toussaintien characters are ‘suffocated’ by the presence of gadgets in their everyday life. Thus the question arises – what is the relation between man and gadgets as represented in the literary works of Jean-Philippe Toussaint? What insights does Toussaint’s exploration of technological consumption offer into the psychological and existential costs of life in a digitally saturated, postmodern consumer culture? This article aims to study the complexity between man and gadgets in the literary works of the author. The study will begin with a brief overview of the author’s biography, followed by an analysis of two selected works—Television and Running Away. We will then examine the notion of malaise that emerges from the ambivalent relationship between the individual and the objects of consumption. Finally, the paper will consider the extent to which technology has shaped and exerted influence over individuals within a consumerist framework.

### The Author

Jean-Philippe Toussaint is a Belgian novelist whose works have been a subject of interest for researchers and scholars. His works emphasize on the contemporary issues like individualism, aloofness, withdrawal, isolation, alienation and resignation that is at the heart of modern technological, digitized society. Born in Brussels in 1957 to a journalist and writer father and a bookseller mother, he was raised in a flourishing cultural milieu. He graduated from Sciences Po, Paris and he studied contemporary history from Sorbonne in 1980. Toussaint’s works are published by the influential publishing house Les Editions de Minuit, Paris. His novels have been translated into more than twenty languages.

For Toussaint, Samuel Beckett, the Irish avant-garde novelist was a major influence. At the same time, he was influenced by the Nouveau Roman, a genre of French novel started in the 1950s which branched off from classical literary genres. His first novel The Bathroom was published in 1985. The novel was well received, its style was critically acclaimed and it established Toussaint as a young and promising author. Then followed Monsieur (1986) and Camera (1989) which confirmed his status as a writer.

Toussaint won the Prix Médicis for the novel *Running Away* in 2005; in 1996, he won the Prix Décembre for *The Truth about Marie*. Toussaint is, at the same time, a filmmaker. He has directed, amongst others, *Monsieur* in 1990, an adaptation from his novel of the same name. Apart from being a writer and filmmaker, he is a photographer. He has conducted exhibitions in Japan, China, Belgium and France. He has curated an exhibition entitled “*Livre/Louvre*” at the museum of Louvre in Paris.

Before undertaking a detailed analysis of his works, let us first examine Toussaint’s distinctive literary style. Like other works published by Les Éditions de Minuit, which have significantly contributed to the literary foundation of the Nouveau Roman, Toussaint’s writing adopts a minimalist style, emphasizing only the essential narrative elements. The protagonists he creates are principally reserved and reticent to the point of being described as timid and unsociable. The protagonist talks about himself and the people around him in bits and pieces and we, the readers, are ‘expected’ to construct the connecting link between them. The tone of the characters is often “detached” and they give us the impression that there is nothing much happening in the story; in fact, the author himself said in one of the interviews that there is “no story” in his works. In addition, one element that stands out in the works of Toussaint is the position of the characters when juxtaposed against objects (‘objects’ here used interchangeably with ‘gadgets’). In Toussaint’s work, the narration itself is already tensed when it comes to the relation between these two poles – that is between subject and objects; or in other words, between the consumers and the gadgets.

Toussaint’s work is known for his usage of monotonous, seemingly disinterested, and resigned tone. Thus, he is classified under the minimalist, postmodern writers of contemporary writers. He writes in the first person who remains anonymous. Thus, the ‘hero’ is a narrator-protagonist with an air of indifference who participates silently and observantly. Like his contemporaries in the French and Francophone literature such as Jean Echenoz, Michelle Houellebecq and Patrick Modiano, works of Toussaint preoccupy themes which predominantly focus on the subject of solitude, isolation, imprisonment, impassibility and isolation. In the works of Toussaint, the style of writing in itself is a manifestation of the crisis of self-identification as the characters try to find a space for themselves in a society already stuffed with gadgets. Their gestures, behavior, and attitude are conditioned by the presence of objects/gadgets around them.

### Corpus of the Study

In the novel *Television*, the protagonist is a young professor who has taken a sabbatical to concentrate on a project. He decides to stay in Berlin for the summer while his wife and his son go on a vacation so that he can fully devote his time to his work. During his days which are spent in solitude and isolation, he gets occupied with the television in his house. The television takes over his plans. He wakes up in the morning, takes coffee and with the plan to work, he would find himself on his study table. But then he sees that the table isn’t aligned properly with the window or he sees cobwebs up on a corner of the ceiling and he gets busy taking care of the apparent ‘priorities’. Thereafter, he wanders into the living room, takes the remote, switches on the television and watches anything that is being aired.

He finds himself the most comfortable pullover, stretches out on the sofa, like a cat in his litter (Toussaint 1997), and watches TV for an uninterrupted span of three to four hours, eventually consuming the entirety of his day. Perhaps some of us have come across such situation where a movie, or a series, or a cricket match or a football match being aired on the television got us engaged for hours at a stretch. This is more so in the age of satellite television programming, Netflix, Prime Video and

YouTube. He confesses that after watching the television from noon till night, he comes out exhausted with an empty mind and lifeless limbs (Toussaint 1997).

If we look at the life of Toussaint's protagonist like that of a "cat in his litter", we realize that unconsciously, the protagonist is living a life which is similar to that of a domesticated animal. This is because as a rational being, the protagonist is expected to utilize the faculty to rationalize and to reason what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. However, looking at the protagonist who is clearly obsessed with the television, we realize how much of his physical space and his mental space is encroached upon and colonized by the object. He is aware of the physical uneasiness and the mental stress which are borne by his habit of watching television. Yet, he is, at the end of the day, simply helpless.

Thus with the invasion of the physical and mental space by objects, an individual is being manipulated by the objects he consumes. In a more debatable tone, we are living in the world of "revolution of intelligence" and "cognitive capitalism" where artificial intelligence is already incorporated in our daily lives.

The novel *Running Away* tells a story of a young man who goes to China on an errand for his partner. When he reaches the airport, he is met by a stern, serious looking Chinese man with black sunglasses who reminds him of a robot. This man gives him a mobile phone with the strict instruction that he has to carry the gadget wherever he goes. From that time onward, he is constantly gripped by irrational fear. In addition to the strangeness of the language, people and place, his anxiety is multiplied by this constant fear that he is being watched and followed (Toussaint 2005). He gets this uncanny feeling that his every movement is being tracked, observed and monitored. For the protagonist, the mobile phone becomes an object of nuisance and hindrance. All through the novel, the protagonist is consumed by a profound sense of malaise, unease, awkwardness, anxiety, lassitude, and fear.

Here we can relate to the predicament of the protagonist in today's world where, for instance, we are now constantly being monitored, watched and followed by the objects (gadgets) that we are using like smart phones, smart televisions etc. Similarly, the debate on net neutrality and privacy, the question of Aadhar, the incident of Facebook misleading and undermining the privacy of its users, Alexa and CCTVs are instances, perhaps, which make Toussaint's works relevant in the present context.

### **The Ambivalent Relationship between Consumers and Technology**

In *Television*, we find a television set which occupies the physical space of the protagonist and in *Running Away*, we find a mobile phone which the protagonist must carry around with him wherever he goes. Thus, these objects stand in for the wider spectrum of technological and scientific advancements which have slowly and manipulatively invaded our mental as well as physical space. In the 90s, for instance, television as an object occupied our living space. However, in the 2000s, with cell phones and iPad and tablets, we find gadgets which have invaded our body itself.

According to the French sociologist, philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, machine was the emblem of the industrial society and gadget is the emblem of the post-industrial society (Baudrillard 1970). Today we live in a homogenous, post-industrial world where objects we consume gradually conditions our behavior. In a situation like this how do we define ourselves? Where is our unique identity? Bernard Stiegler theorizes on this irrational phenomenon of consumption where he studies the complexity of the relation between the objects and the consumers. A consumer finds himself in a schizophrenic situation when it comes to his relation with the objects he consumes – he is not aware of

the utility of the objects anymore but he keeps in constant contact with the objects (Stiegler 2006). As a result, most consumers can barely differentiate between what is real and what is virtual just like the protagonist of Television. Are the objects facilitating and enriching our lives or are they agents of obstacles and hindrance in our day-to-day life? Just like the characters of Toussaint, we realize that much of our time is wasted and many of our works have been left incomplete due to the presence of objects at arm's length in our premise. Addiction and dependency on gadgets are symptoms of the present day society.

If the *mal du siècle* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was ennui, sadness, nostalgia and melancholy, the *mal du siècle* of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is fatigue, reticence, solitude, isolation, withdrawal and depression. These symptoms are a result of the presence and the consumption of objects in the postmodern society. These objects are metamorphosed into a Frankenstein's monster who possesses the power to retro-consume its consumers.

Looking at the society which we find ourselves in today and the literary world that Toussaint has created, the similarity is uncanny. The world that Toussaint describes is a well-crafted yet innocent representation of the real, tangible society of today. It is a reflection of the busy world where we hardly have time for ourselves, where we barely have space – mental as well as physical- for ourselves.

Thus, at the end of the day, who consumes whom?

Is it individuals within the society who consume the electronic gadgets invented by science and technology? Or are the gadgets, in fact, consuming us – by occupying our physical and mental space? Are we being too naïve in our relation with the objects we consume every day? At some point, we seem to have taken the manipulating power of these gadgets for granted.

In the novel *Fight Club* of Chuck Palahniuk, Tyler Durden, one of the characters said that “the things you used to own, now they own you”. This statement is a viable attempt at explaining the relation between consumers and the objects of consumption.

### Concluding Remarks

Mobile applications have replaced almost every aspect of our lives – from the games we play to the books we read. In fact, the advent of sophisticated gadgets like iPhones, smart phones and iPads, has rendered news, games and books portable and easily accessible, thereby offering consumers greater convenience and cost-efficiency. However, the massive online information that we access and consume is a double-edged sword. How do we filter the right information from the false ones? According to Daniel M. Wegner and Adrian F. Ward in the *Scientific American*:

“The information retrieved from the Internet now arrives sometimes more quickly than what we can pull out of our own memories. The immediacy with which a search result pops onto the screen of a smartphone may start to blur the boundaries between our personal memories and the vast digital troves distributed across the Internet.”

In addition, Gary Small, a professor of psychiatry in UCLA conducted a study to check on how much is the brain and neural activity affected when dependent on online resources. His findings reveal that it appears that Google is making people smarter by keeping many of the brain cells buzzing. However, it points out that more brain activity is not necessarily better brain activity. Small concluded that digital technology is altering our brains. In short, it's the fragmentation of the mind wherein thoughts are neither retained nor processed in a coherent manner. The old-fashioned practice of maintaining a diary, reading books and newspapers in print edition is a rarity now. By studying the Toussaintien characters, the



author suggests that we live in an era of fragmentation of the psyche. His works invite an interrogation of the ironic intersection where digital interfaces promise connection but deliver isolation, fear and insecurity. In this technologically saturated environment, Toussaint critiques the illusion of control in consumer society. His works are a commentary on how technology reconfigures the way we live and who we are becoming.

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