



EXCERPTS

# ESSAY

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*Reading Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow*

by John Ray, Jr.

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*Orson Welles: The Road to Xandu*

Simon Callow

Penguin Books

640 pages (softcover)

*Extraterrestrial Sex Fetish*

Supervert

Supervert 32C

213 pages (softcover)

*Reading Pictures*

*A History of Love and Hate*

Alberto Manguel

Random House

337 pages (hardcover)

*Vermeer's Camera*

*Uncovering the Truth Behind the Masterpieces*

Philip Steadman

Oxford University Press

207 pages (hardcover)

I hung at Café Orlin, reading about the manic genius of Orson Welles as he moved to the inflection point of his career with *Citizen Kane*, while looking out on the East Village crowd: teenagers with Mohawks enchained and chain smoking, aging hippies re-reading Sartre and eating meat, Gen X and Y girls and boys pierced and globally attuned, wired inwardly by Palm Pilots playing world music MP3s.

I lounged on a couch in Bedford, New York, in a house of glass, reading a book about a modern day Marquis de Sade who fantasizes about sex with alien life forms, while I looked out on a pond where snapping turtles basked on a rock at midday, where a blue heron circled elegantly, landing at the waters edge to pick off the numerous goldfish, and migrating geese stopped to squabble and shit.

I sat on a train heading east from Hoboken, past marshland dotted with wild flowers, away each morning from, and back each evening to, a city, my home, re-arranged behind and before me, altered in topology, in psychology, in the enormity of personal loss, in the turning of pages of future history, reading a very personal and idiosyncratic book about reading the stories of love and hate and every other human and inhuman emotion, implicit and imposed, in visual art from ancient cave scratchings to

contemporary painting.

I breakfasted at Pershing Square, self-consciously eating buttery pancakes full of fresh blueberries, drinking strong black coffee, trying to piece the puzzle together, the quotidian and the tragic, while across the street in Grand Central Station police patrolled beneath the restored constellations and the newly draped American flags.

I walked through the life of Oscar Wilde at the Morgan Library and the early years of Chagall at the Jewish Museum, not of two but of four minds: the triviality of art; the sublime nature of art; the sense of community with these strangers shuffling past cases of artifacts or pictures on the walls; and lastly, the unfamiliar sense of apprehension, watching these strangers out of the corner of my eye for odd behavior, sudden movement, a threat.

I lay atop our Victorian bed, the afternoon light filtering in through the dusty windows, reading the fascinating optical sleuthing on the mysterious art of Vermeer, his seemingly photographic detail that is somehow mitigated by a strangely riveting unfocused quality, imagining Johannes with his *camera obscura* technique painting the scene outside our apartment, the intersection unnaturally quiet, like *The Little Street*, or me, robed in a vintage silk smoking jacket, perhaps fancying myself *The Geographer*.

And now I hover over my laptop, looking out the open window, the autumn breeze blowing in, the streets quieter than usual, more taxis empty than full, but college kids still trudging along, overburdened with backpacks full of books, and the now rarer tourist, unfolding a map at the street corner, looking south, drawn by morbid curiosity and the sacred desire of pilgrimage.

These books have helped, these two weeks later, when I have been at last able to face reading for sheer pleasure again—

The sheer bravado of Welles, as so tangibly and articulately and charmingly detailed by the actor Simon Callow, his inexhaustible energy and ego, his haphazard inventiveness, his infectious laugh.

When Welles and Edwin Denby more rewrite than translate the Labiche-Michel French farce of 1850 as “Horse Eats Hat”, with surreal dialogue that anticipates *Beyond the Fringe* and Monty Python and Donald Barthelme (“The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace”), as when the guests for the party are announced: “Dowager Lady Sucker/Duchess O’Grady/A large piece of pastrami/A simple tick of Siam/The three little pigs/The teeth of Gloria Swanson.”

The astounding inventiveness and hysterical perversity of “Extraterrestrial Sex Fetish” that reads like a cross between Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom* and Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, with Pynchon and Powers tossed in for erudition (discourses on the relevance of philosophers, from Berkeley to Wittgenstein, to the fetishizing of extraterrestrials). The book is lyrical and comical and altogether, regardless of its “pornographic” content, magical:

A world where male visitors are castrated because the women are so attractive, and where the male and female inhabitants are sexual chameleons as a further defensive mechanism, with false orifices and appendages of either sex appearing anywhere on their bodies;

A world in which on the planet Eta, women have “skin the midnight purple of blueberries...and hair a subtle silver, owing to certain sparkling metals in the local diet” and where the ever adventurous protagonist Mercury de Sade participates in an orgy where he has ingested, and also secretly fed to each girl, a pill that induces synesthesia, so that he might feel any number of

sensations in any part of his body—imagine climaxing from your fingertips or being penetrated in your belly button;

A world where a *ménage a trois* that becomes a *ménage mélange* because the princess and her handmaiden are denizens of the planet Lambda, where persons are made of autonomous organisms, and their hands and arms and heads and breasts and buttocks and genitalia can all detach themselves and move independently;

A world where visiting the “time whores” on Omicron, one can indulge in “temporal perversities”, where a” man could have sex with his own memory.”

Make no mistake, this book will not appeal to many, may even repulse some—it is graphic with both homosexual and heterosexual acts pertaining to every orifice real and imagined, every bodily fluid and excretion, and is even at times sadistic (though much less so than the original de Sade). But this is one of the most purely inventive books, one of the most unrestrained flights of fancy (albeit warped), that I have had a close encounter with in some time.

The sheer love of art and literature and humanity in all its diversity is the real subject of this latest offering from one of my favorite non-fiction writers, Alberto Manguel (who is also a phenomenal anthologist—see his anthology of fantastic literature from around the world, *Black Water*). That, and the very personality that is Alberto Manguel, a man whose own particular passion, intellectual curiosity, and fascination with cultural arcane, are all mapped out in *Reading Pictures*. The book, like his previous *A History of Reading*, is the wondrous evocation of a person who lives (and will have lived), his thoughts, loves and hates, imaginings, longings, dreams. For example, in a chapter that begins with Joan Mitchell's *Two Pianos*, he cites one of my favorite Beckett lines in *Molloy*, in discussing whether a painting can be ever free of context, perhaps must always produce (if not invite) a reading, an interpretation, even the abstract expressionist works such as Pollack's: "there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names."

And lastly, a more purely academic book, but one so engaging in the scientific detectiveness of its art historical pursuits—the attempt to

prove Vermeer's usage of an optical device such as a *camera obscura* to paint his haunting pictures that seem to draw their unique effects from the paradoxical quality of being a "perfect perspectival illusion of depth *coexisting* with an effect of surface flatness which can suggest mosaic or marquetry." The author, a Professor at University College London, uses trigonometry and optical properties and even counts the floor tiles in the paintings to extrapolate the size and dimensions of the original rooms and the position of Vermeer when painting, all in evidence of specific geometrical phenomenon that can most readily be explained by his use of a camera-like device. Steadman does not see such a technical aid diminishing his talent in any way, but simply highlighting his "obsession with light, tonal values, shadow and colour." In the course of this pursuit, we are introduced to some remarkable historical personages, including Huygens and Kepler, and one Cornelis Drebbel, a sixteenth century Dutch inventor, one of whose creations was the "clavycymbalo", a musical instrument that played itself through the actions of the sun's rays.

And so I read, to imagine myself with boundless energy and belief in myself. I read, to imagine the alternative universes of my life, the loves and lusts. I read, and pay homage to paintings and photographs and sculpture

and movies, to understand the horrors I have not known, to reinforce the grand acts of salvation and the anonymous little acts of kindness. I read, to learn what I do not know or have forgotten or think I needn't know. I read, words and pictures--therefore I am, and we will be.