

Casting the Novel

References to Actors in the Work of Jean Echenoz

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J'ai le tic de parler comme si je faisais du cinéma, mais d'une certaine manière j'ai quelquefois l'impression d'en faire.¹
—Jean Echenoz

Although many scholars have remarked upon the importance of cinema in Jean Echenoz's œuvre, relatively little attention has been paid to the numerous references to film actors in his novels.² This is somewhat surprising given the abundance of such references in Echenoz's fiction, and the ways in which they inflect his appropriation of the stylistic and thematic features of popular novelistic genres. Describing a character by means of a reference to a popular actor is, after all, a common practice in late-twentieth-century crime fiction. While this operation has a variety of potential uses, the most conventional instrumentalization of references to actors involves the supposition that they help readers "visualize" characters. When, for example, the narrator of one of Didier Daeninckx's stories says of a character that "elle ressemblait à Adjani jeune" (Daeninckx 41), this description invites the reader to visualize that character with the features of the well-known actress Isabelle Adjani. At the other end of the literary spectrum, when Alain Robbe-Grillet's narrator comments that "[s]a voix chantante et son aspect androgyne évoquent, pour moi, l'actrice Jane Frank" (Robbe-Grillet 13), this "ungrammatical" reference to a fictional actress—who has the characteristics of Jean Seberg but the name of a real artist (Jane Frank 1918–1986)—complicates potential "visual" reading, moves beyond the "utopie linguistique" (Hamon 6) of nomenclaturism to something like *significance* (Riffaterre 22). In Echenoz's novels, references to actors occupy an uneasy middle ground between the strategies of genre fiction and those of metafiction. They produce a tension between critical and celebratory gestures, between modes of reading which cultivate critical distance and those

which are immersive, “naïve,” representational, or, in the terms that we employed for Daeninckx’s description, *visual*.³ The question of what Echenoz’s novels do with these references to film actors opens, therefore, onto larger questions concerning the relationship between descriptive practices and representational reading, and the complex genealogies that these novels establish with popular novels and with traditions of experimental fiction. The present study will argue that while Echenoz’s references to actors do explore the ways in which descriptive reference can exceed its function as a straightforward prompt for visualization, the practice of “casting” actors in his novels also emphasizes how a shared cultural experience of cinema allows text to produce vivid effects of visual presence.

The broad devalorization of representational ambitions, emerging from a long tradition of anti-mimetic thought, creates problems for descriptions that aim to promote visualizations of characters that are potentially reliant on knowledge of film actors.⁴ Anti-mimetic literary theory often views immersive descriptive fiction as guilty of rendering the reader susceptible to an uncritical reception of ideology (usually masquerading as “nature” or “the real”), and privileges metafictional forms which, in laying bare their conventions, “de-doxify,” undermine the naïveté or “illusions” that ground more conventional fictional practices.⁵ It is precisely this dichotomy between popular, ideologically suspect representational fiction, and serious, epistemologically rigorous *literature* that many recent theoretical works on mimesis and fictionality have sought to problematize. Abandoning a rigid conception of mimesis as simple imitation or surface isomorphism, Stephen Halliwell suggests an alternate interpretation—based in a reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics*—which would view mimesis not as a sub-category of fictional activity (corresponding to “realism”), but rather as fiction’s equivalent:

[Aristotle makes a case] for treating artistic mimesis as equivalent to fiction, if by “fiction” we here understand the modeling of a world whose status is that of an imaginary, constructed parallel to the real, spatiotemporal realm of the artist’s and audience’s experience: imaginary, in that it rests on a shared agreement between the maker and recipients of the mimetic work to suspend the norms of literal truth; but “parallel,” in that its interpretation depends on standards of explanatory and causal coherence that are essentially derived from and grounded in real experience (166).

What is reproduced by mimesis, in this account, is not the form of the actual, but a certain intentional structure which can be mapped upon it. It is this

Aristotelian conception of mimesis that reappears in Jean-Marie Schaeffer's work on fictionality, a conception of mimesis in which the essential characteristic of representation is variability, permitting mimetic models to remain operative in diverse situational contexts that never strictly coincide with the representation.⁶ For Schaeffer, one of the great faculties of our minds is the ability to simulate experiences, predict outcomes, and establish relations of *resemblance* across a wide variety of contexts. This contention underpins a broader rehabilitation of "immersive" fiction which refuses the "bizarrerie historique" that consists of celebrating the imaginative power of the author while disparaging immersive forms of reading (Schaeffer 179–180). Such a conception of textual representation is consistent with Richard Walsh's assertion that fiction can be theorized "in a way that avoids any incommensurability between attitudes of direct engagement and critical knowingness; between participation in, and consciousness of, the game of fictive discourse" (*The Rhetoric of Fictionality* 172).⁷ If the anti-mimetic tradition produces rigid distinctions between fictional types—*scriptible* versus *lisible*; dialogic, intertextual, or productive versus representational-expressive—this more supple conception of fictionality and mimesis does not disqualify popular representational fiction on the grounds of its naïveté or supposed reliance on a "referential fallacy."⁸ This question of the potentialities and uses of fiction conceived of as a process of mimetic modeling thus has broad implications not only for our understanding of fiction as such, but also for our reading of descriptive practices that either assume or subvert visualization, and their association with categories of fictional texts (genre fiction or "high" literature) and readers (popular, scholarly or serious).⁹

Returning to the comparison with Isabelle Adjani, one might say that with the exception of the minimal qualification that Daeninckx introduces ("Adjani *jeune*"), such a description represents the simplest kind of comparison with an actress, a semantic norm against which deviant practices can be judged. Daeninckx refers to a well-known actress that many, though certainly not all of his readers are likely to have seen in films, and whose facial characteristics they will likely be able to recall at least approximately. At the very least, such a description is likely to connote (beauty, sex appeal, etc.). It is hard to attribute such straightforward, functional uses, however, to comparisons of the sort that one finds in Jean Echenoz's *Cherokee* (1983):

La dame qui vint ouvrir n'avait plus sa jeunesse mais elle était bien belle, droite, ferme et fardée, avec un sourire émouvant. Elle avait un visage de bonne fée incestueuse, comme le portrait-robot établi par

un homme qui voudrait décrire à la fois Michèle Morgan et Grace Kelly à cinquante-cinq ans, cet homme étant Walt Disney (28).¹⁰

The way that excess description sabotages this passage's imagistic efficacy recalls Malraux's famous assertion that "plus Balzac décrit un visage, moins je vois le visage qu'il décrit" (Picon 62). Where in a middlebrow crime fiction novel one might find a simple comparative reference to an actress (e.g. "elle ressemblait à Grace Kelly à cinquante-cinq ans"), here the reader encounters a much more complex tangle of evocations. If the first sentence establishes indisputable facts of the character's appearance ("belle, droite, ferme et fardée, avec un sourire émouvant"), the second sentence introduces comparisons which do anything but clarify the "picture." This description is conceptually rich—it brings up cultural references with which many readers will no doubt be familiar (the films of Michèle Morgan, Grace Kelly, and Walt Disney), and it plays with conflicting connotations (of wholesomeness and of lasciviousness or perversion)—but from a perspective of visualization the outcome of such a description is far from certain. By associating the character's face not with that of a particular actress, but with a *composite sketch* of two actresses produced by a cartoonist, this passage does not offer a visual model for the reader so much as it stages a representational problem: the way that reader and writer subjectivity, as well as the mediation of textuality, risk undermining any attempted communication of resemblance. Viewed in this light, it could be argued that what Echenoz does here is take a simple descriptive practice and transform it into something *critical* (drawing attention to the descriptive conventions of its generic model), which is to say, something *literary* (productive of meaning rather than representational). In this way, the difference between Daeninckx's and Echenoz's descriptions points to some of the habitual criteria that are used to delineate serious literature from popular fiction.¹¹

In addition to the aforementioned comparison to Grace Kelly and Michèle Morgan, which seems to function first and foremost to humorously underscore its own failure to represent, there are numerous references to actors or actresses in Echenoz's work that on some level implicitly problematize resemblance, visualization or representation. One practical issue confronting the use of actors as prompts for imaginative visualization is that of the variable familiarity of different readers with different actors. Leaving aside the fundamental question of whether reading fiction prompts visualization at all (many readers say they visualize, but some say they do not), nothing guarantees that a reader will be familiar with an actor that a text

references. I believe that I can visualize Isabelle Adjani, but I have no idea what Orane Demazis (Echenoz 2006 10) looks like; and although Zero Mostel (Echenoz 1997 84) is a fairly well-known actor whose face would likely be familiar to many readers, I could not recall his face either.¹² One way that Echenoz highlights this problem of reader subjectivity in description is by referencing obscure actors or character actors rather than stars. When Echenoz describes a character by saying “[e]lle ressemblait à Dorothy Gish, la sœur de Lilian [sic]” (1979 27), the choice of the lesser-known of the two sisters manifestly abandons an instrumental concern for potential visualization, evoking instead the problems that the variability of reader culture poses for descriptions of this sort. The arbitrariness of such declarations of resemblance is also emphasized in descriptions such as the following: “Mac Gregor ressemblait, disons, à Gary Cooper, et Forsythe plutôt à Franchot Tone” (*Ibid.* 44). This “disons” immediately foregrounds the conventional nature of all statements of visual resemblance in textual fiction. Such moments pointing to the arbitrariness of textual resemblance suggest, at first glance, more interest in playing with descriptive traditions, or in staging humorous failures to describe, than in producing immersive representational fiction.

Resemblance has a highly uncertain status in Echenoz’s work. It is often affirmed, but usually finds itself just as quickly qualified or problematized; it is approximate (“un petit jeune homme qui ne rappelait personne sauf peut-être Elisha Cook Jr. à ses débuts” [Echenoz 1986 40]; “un faux air de Randolph Scott leucémique” [Echenoz 1986 83]) or unrealistically perfect (“Il ressemblait à Staline; cela tombait donc bien qu’il s’appelât Joseph” [Echenoz 1979 52]); and it is, of course, potentially qualifiable (“leucémique,” “à ses débuts” “à cinquante-cinq ans”). Questions of resemblance are always, in some way, questions of identity, and in Echenoz’s fiction, the line that separates resemblance from identity is often fuzzy. References to popular actors can serve to strongly establish the visual identity of a character, but they also threaten to subsume the supposed individuality of the character beneath the weight of cinematic stereotyping. One passage that is particularly striking from this perspective is found in *Nous trois*: “Il n’aurait conservé, punaisé sur un mur de la cuisine, qu’un portrait de femme brune qui lui a toujours rappelé Victoria, bien que celle-ci eût été blonde, une photographie de Cindy Sherman intitulée *Untitled film still #7*” (19). This reference not to an actress but to an artist playing an actress, which is to say, to a representation of cinematic clichés, drives home the point that resemblance of textual characters or even real people to touchstones of a shared iconic imaginary is on some

level a question of stereotyping: the difference in hair color is unimportant faced with the association of the two women through a common performance or role. It also draws out the ambiguity at the heart of even simple descriptions of resemblance; Sherman's film stills are so evocative in part because they are so *recognizable*, even as the "actress" that is their subject remains entirely fictional. In just this way, Gloire Abgrall, the protagonist of *Les Grandes Blondes*, is at once an entirely fictional actress and an outgrowth of a real, if highly intangible, cinematic imaginary that she shares with an entire family of blonde starlets: "Monroe-Dietrich-Bardot" (65); Anita Ekberg and Julie London (66); Kim Novak (96); Stéphane Audran, Angie Dickenson and Monica Vitti (104); Jean Harlow and Doris Day (119); Jayne Mansfield (151); Eva Marie Saint, Ingrid Bergman and Grace Kelly (200). The infructuous attempts of one of the novel's secondary characters, Paul Salvatore, to establish a *typology* of tall blondes can be read as a sly commentary on both the powerful evocative potential of cinematic stereotypes, and the ultimate futility of any attempt to codify or contain the panoply of connotations that emerges from them. This exploration of cinematic stereotypes seems to lead, therefore, into a web of potentially problematic evocations and connotations, rather than towards a nomenclatural denotation of visual identity.

An analysis of such "failed" or at least problematic descriptions naturally leads to an association of Echenoz with a broader tradition of writers who conceive of "cinematic" literature not as a literature which produces vivid mental representations (the *topos* of imagination as cinema), but as a rhetorical strategy in which the failure of the text to become "cinema" (or to become "visual") first draws attention to the specificity of the textual medium, and then critiques the naïveté of nomenclaturism, of the "referential fallacy," of a certain view of literature and cinema as similar or even mutually translatable by virtue of a shared status as mimetic arts. In scholarly studies of Echenoz's novels, emphasis has indeed systematically been placed on these novels' *critical* relationship to cinematic representations and traditions, developed despite or perhaps even because of the author's fascination with cinema. Sjeff Houppermans has suggested that in Echenoz's fiction, cinematic techniques are present "dans l'altérité essentielle de leur caractère écrit, permettant justement d'exhiber les pièges et illusions de l'image" (155). Christine Jérusalem concurs that "[l]a médiation cinématographique dévoile autant la facticité de la représentation que celle du monde lui-même" (87), and that cinematic comparisons "mettent à mal la mimesis" (89).¹³ Consistent with the didactic nature of much anti-mimetic thought—the reader must be taught that what she is reading is "faux, feint,

factice" (*Ibid.* 89)—Echenoz's appropriation of the themes and narrative conventions of cinema is, from this perspective, an essentially anti-realist technique. This particular treatment of the topic of cinema in Echenoz's novels also instrumentalizes the habitual function of anti-mimetic theory as a discourse of *distinction* (Schaeffer 25–26): Echenoz's work, which has been accused of being "breezy" and "yuppie-ish" (LaSalle 235), a "littérature de divertissement" (Domecq 163), a wallowing in "infra-littérature" (Millet 33), is bestowed the full aesthetic prestige of *innovative* fiction.¹⁴ The common scholarly interpretation of Echenoz's thematization of cinema thus saves the author from the "illusions" of popular fiction, including notably what Jean Ricardou considered a naïve confusion of cinema and literature, placing him instead within a family of authors who "write back" against the modern empire of the image and against the notion of text as productive of "images" (Blatt 22).¹⁵ The lesson that Echenoz's "cinematic" literature seeks to impart, according to this reading, is thus still the one that Ricardou highlighted in his studies of the *Nouveau Roman*: "Il est permis de voir un film; nous sommes contraints de déchiffrer un livre" (Ricardou 88).

In the studies that have explicitly or obliquely addressed references to actors in Echenoz's novels, resemblance or identity has systematically been read either as indicative of the text's emphasis on its own status as copy or fiction (i.e. as a metafictional strategy), or as part of a broader problematization of individuality.¹⁶ Indisputably, one of the effects that a comparison to an actor may have, in life or in fiction, is that of reducing the individual to the status of *type*. Without disqualifying such interpretations, it is interesting that Echenoz's own statements on the presence of actors in his novels avoid much of the critical vocabulary habitually associated with anti-mimetic theory. When Echenoz was asked about the strongest form of resemblance to actors in his œuvre—the appearance of Dean Martin and Doris Day in the afterlife of *Au piano*—he gave a somewhat surprising explanation:

[C]'était comme si je faisais un casting. À partir du moment où j'ai eu l'idée des deux personnages . . . sont arrivés très vite ces deux visages-là. Doris Day sur le plan de son apparence physique: elle me paraissait bien cadrer avec la fonction que je lui donne dans le livre, ce qui fait que pour elle j'ai surtout travaillé avec des photos. Dean Martin, lui, ne m'intéressait pas seulement pour son aspect physique mais pour sa personnalité. ("La phrase comme dessin" 299)

What this statement suggests is the importance, in Echenoz's conception of literature, of communicating resemblance (visual and actantial), even if

this communication sets the stage for later problematization of these resemblances. Such a view is reinforced by statements that Echenoz has made comparing his writing process to a kind of transcription of an interior cinema: “Je ne peux pas écrire une scène sans d’une certaine manière la voir dans mon esprit un petit peu comme si elle était déjà filmée. . . . [ce sont] des outils qui sont un petit peu ceux du cinéma” (“Loin avec Jean Echenoz”). While the qualifications (“d’une certaine manière,” “un petit peu,” “un petit peu”) in this passage must be given their full weight—they point to the yawning gap that separates the formal and material expression of a work from the complex set of mental processes involved in what we call imagination—it is significant that this account of writing emphasizes the representational capacities of text, and links such capacities to a notion of imagination as potentially “cinematic.” These statements suggest another line of interpretation, which would view references to actors not as part of a straightforward critique of representational realism, but rather as part of a broader questioning of identity, resemblance, presence and absence. If Echenoz humorously calls attention to the deficiencies of comparisons intended to make the reader “see,” he is also clearly interested in the mimetic potentialities of fiction, in the power of the cinematic imaginary to evoke and to produce effects of visual *presence*—or what Echenoz calls “l’émotion visuelle” (“La phrase comme dessin” 311)—which contrast with the eventual absence, the “géographies du vide” (Jérusalem) that all of his novels explore.¹⁷

Malraux’s short statement about Balzac’s descriptions (“Plus Balzac décrit un visage, moins je vois le visage qu’il décrit”) is often cited as evidence of the inevitable failure of realist description. However, if one reads the end of Malraux’s reflection on the subject, his conclusions about how visualization works in fiction do not stop at simple pessimism:

Je vois le Père Goriot parce que je projette sur lui, confusément, les dessins de Daumier (et l’œuvre de celui-ci est pour moi, non seulement une prodigieuse illustration de Balzac, mais encore un monde qui se superpose à la *Comédie humaine* et lui donne le dessin qui lui manque) (Picon 62).

Once again, one must see in this “confusément” an evocation of the distance that separates mental visualization (“mind’s eye”) from actual seeing (eye), even if seeing is, of course, always cognitive.¹⁸ What Malraux’s comment confronts us with, however, is the way in which a shared culture of iconic representations can act as a supplement to text, can provoke visualization that conventional Balzacian description does not necessarily achieve as

effectively. It is this supplement provided by the cinematic imaginary or “le domaine public du cinéma” (“La phrase comme dessin” 303) that Echenoz’s texts explore, but in a typical Echenozian fashion, which is to say, blending appreciation and parody, sabotaging the efficacy of the text in order, paradoxically, to highlight its potential efficacy. In *Au Piano*, “Dino” refuses the identity of Dean Martin, despite the overwhelming evidence of resemblance (Echenoz 2003 169), while Doris Day turns out to be the “real” Doris Day, but displays a lubriciousness (“elle avait pratiqué de longues pipes étonnamment sophistiquées” [147]) which belies the habitual connotations of wholesomeness attached to the actress (“elle exhalait la morale stricte et la bonne santé” [91], “embaumant plus que jamais le végétarisme et la science chrétienne” [104–105]).¹⁹ As these examples suggest, characters in Echenoz’s novels, whether a fictional Doris Day or a man who has “un faux air de Randolph Scott leucémique,” are constantly moving between on the one hand identification or identity, and on the other dis- or misidentification, stereotyping, displacement or absence of self. Although Max, the hero of *Au Piano*, has no cinematic identity (outside of the “film” of his passionate night with Doris Day), his trajectory in the novel raises the same issues with identity that the references to actors do. He physically disappears (death) and comes back (rebirth); he is fundamentally the same, but different (“le même quoique sans conteste un autre [162]”); he is sometimes, but not always, recognizable; he is present and absent at the same time. It is this *passage* from one state to another—metaphorically expressed in the movement between spheres of existence (life, afterlife)—which characterizes Echenoz’s use of references to actors: characters adopt visual and actantial stereotypes, and also play against them; the text adopts semantic norms of description, and then takes them apart in a process that often has a humorous effect, but which also uses the powerful evocation of identity to drive home the depth of the pervasive emptiness and loneliness of Echenoz’s worlds.

In Echenoz’s playful juggling of representational and anti-representational strategies, the latter, potentially critical functions operate by presupposing, in a certain sense, the validity of representational modeling, the power of descriptive language to act as a kind of “cinema.” These novels play with representation, with resemblance, with the presence and absence of self, and they do so both on the level of plot and implicitly in the aesthetic problems with which they confront their readers. This play pushes the limits of representation and explores the spaces where visual readings break down and permit other forms of communication, but this very operation betrays an underlying confidence in the mimetic powers of text; the full spectrum

of literary effects in Echenoz's works involves "naïve" as well as distanced reading modes, imaginative visualization as well as sabotaged description, resemblance as well as dissolution of identity, presence as well as absence.²⁰ In a letter to Jean Echenoz, Jean-Patrick Manchette commented on the strangeness of *Cherokee*:

Ce 'méta-polar' référentiel, cette frénésie de descriptions 'objectales', cette débauche d'allusions . . . tout ce bordel *devrait* être, au bout du compte, une autodestruction et un ratage, un sommet de l'effondrement. Or non. Ça tient. D'une manière antiphysique: comme un château de cartes qui serait une brique (Letter, July 14, 1983).

The apparent "autodestruction," the "failed" descriptions that abound in Echenoz's novels cannot help but suggest a highly critical posture towards immersive genre fiction, "un sommet de l'effondrement"; but in fact, what Manchette perceives in a novel like *Cherokee* is a startling efficacy, emerging "d'une manière antiphysique" from the co-presence of novelistic strategies (critical metafiction and immersive genre fiction) that are often perceived as mutually antagonistic.

In a pregnant passage from a published dialogue between Jean Echenoz and Enrique Vila-Matas, Echenoz recalls an evening that the two spent in a bar, and the miniature model of an airstrip that was found beneath its transparent counter:

il me semblait—confusément, à cette heure-ci, et pourtant avec une netteté qui reste intacte—que c'était ainsi que l'on pouvait avoir envie de traiter un terrain d'aviation dans un roman: comme un modèle réduit que l'on peut aussi agencer à sa guise, avec lequel on peut jouer. C'est là qu'est peut-être l'imposture et en même temps je ne crois pas: c'est un moyen pas mal pour s'approprier de tels lieux (12).

When Echenoz makes this distinction between *imposture* and *appropriation*, he is describing something very close to a definition of fiction as representational, mimetic activity, not in the sense of a strict copy or a fake (imposture or illusion), but in the sense of a cognitive *model*. While so much of the interpretation of Echenoz's fiction focuses on its critical postures—towards realism and the real, towards representation or mimesis, towards our modern *société du spectacle*—the instrumentalization of references to actors suggests less a set of anti-mimetic convictions than a play or experimentation both with ways of making the reader "see" (casting actors), and with ways of making fiction signify while preventing easy visualization ("failed"

descriptions).²¹ If the positive, “uncritical” half of this process has not always been given as much attention, it is perhaps because it opens up onto the slippery and often polemical subjects of mimesis, imagination and visualization. The notion that reading involves imagination is taken for granted by most readers, but as Christophe Wall-Romana has remarked, “today’s literary theory is not quite sure what to do with imagining . . . as a productive and critical force informing, alongside socially determined discourse, aesthetic activity such as writing” (5). Despite numerous assertions of Echenoz’s inauguration of a variety of “returns” (to the world, subject, *roman romanesque*), and recent conceptualizations of the “waning autonomy of any one medium” (Baetens and Blatt 3), much of the interpretation of Echenoz’s treatment of cinema affirms long-standing anti-mimetic biases. A consideration of the full range of types of references to actors in Echenoz’s work should not call into question his place on the “literary” side of the aesthetic polemic that separates “critical” or “literary” treatments of cinema (in which cinema serves as a “repoussoir” underlining the distinction of textuality) from “naïve” or popular treatments of cinema (which seek a form of writing that is “essentiellement descriptive, cinématographique” [Manchette 1996 271]). Rather, such references seem to leave behind this binary in favor of a more “impure” conception of literature.²² If Echenoz’s fiction has often been accused of being subliterate, it is perhaps precisely because it explores the “dangereuse équivoque” (Ricardou 88) of cinematic literature, not only in a critical or ironic mode which underlines its illusions, but also through a form of appropriation that challenges some of the habitual critical categories that ground the delineation between serious literature and popular fiction.

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Notes

1. Echenoz, “Loin avec Jean Echenoz,” unpaginated (radio/internet).
2. Blanckeman, Houppermans and Dytrt touch on the subject obliquely. The most sustained consideration of Echenoz’s references to film actors is found in: Jérusalem 178–182.
3. It is obviously not the contention of the present study that any form of textual fiction involves literal *vision* beyond the act of seeing what is on the page. Rather, many forms of textual fiction, including Daeninckx’s avowedly realist crime fiction, either implicitly or explicitly conceive of reading as a process of imaginative visualization or mental modeling which can be aided by a variety of descriptive strategies. In other words, processes of visualization are part of the common—though highly theoretically polemical—notion of reading “qui construit les oeuvres comme des modèles mimétiques, c’est-à-dire qui traite les fictions comme des représentations” (Schaeffer 25–26). This should not suggest how-

ever, that the present study views “visualization” as synonymous with representational reading. Rather, visualization is perhaps a component of the kind of mental modeling that we engage in when we read a fictional text.

4. The “anti-mimetic tradition” has been widely discussed in scholarship of the past twenty-five years. Overviews of its major theoretical premises can be found in: Compagnon 103–145, Halliwell 344–381, and Schaeffer 21–60.

5. This characterization is consistent with Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s account of the evaluative component of anti-mimetic thought: “Du point de vue des valeurs esthétiques, [l’attitude anti-mimétique] se traduit par un soutien apporté aux œuvres qui ‘subvertissent’ leur fondement mimétique et par une condamnation de celles qui, au contraire, mettent en valeur les techniques imitatives (ressemblance, naturalisme, effet de réel, trompe-l’œil) et par là renforcent l’illusion mimétique” (Schaeffer 24).

6. This conception sidesteps the common rejection of representation that operates “by projecting absolutist status onto ‘the real’ and equating representation with *unmediated* access to the world” (Halliwell 380). It is also broadly consonant with the idea that “[it] is the presumption of relevance, not any expectation of literal truthfulness, that drives the reader’s search for an appropriate interpretative context” (Walsh 2007 30).

7. It should be noted that there is not a perfect match between the conceptions of mimesis developed by Schaeffer, Halliwell and Walsh. In particular, Schaeffer’s notion of fictional reference draws partially on the work of fictional worlds theory, whereas Walsh subordinates the question of direct fictional reference to a pragmatic consideration of the rhetorical efficacy and relevance of fiction. What all three seek to problematize, however, is the reduction of mimesis to a naïve “world-reflecting” paradigm (Halliwell 380).

8. The threat of this disqualification can be read in the highly common practice of defending the *literary* quality of a particular contemporary author by assuring the reader that he or she is not “dupe” to the illusions of popular fiction. In this manner, Sjeff Houppermans defends Echenoz’s novels by stating: “Ce n’est cependant aucunement un retour en arrière, car ce romanesque-là est le fruit d’une technique *consciente de soi et maître de ses moyens*” (26, my emphasis).

9. As Stephen Halliwell notes, judgment on representational art forms “depends greatly on where one stands on the spectrum between ‘popular’ and ‘avant garde’” (380).

10. This passage is likely inspired by a similar passage in Jean-Patrick Manchette’s *L’Affaire N’Gustro*, in which a composite reference to film actors ends with the narrator admitting: “Bon, ça évoque pas grand-chose qu’un sacré bordel” (*Romans noirs* 193). That Echenoz’s concern with the communicability of visual descriptive content might be inspired by Manchette’s novels is suggested not only by the similar descriptive techniques found in both authors’ œuvres, but also by a common repertoire of actors (Franchot Tone, Elisha Cook, Jr.).

11. This should not suggest, of course, that self-consciousness or metafictional strategies are absent from popular genre fiction. As Simon Kemp has observed, crime fiction “is itself capable of metafictional considerations from within the genre, and commonly includes aspects of self-referentiality” (16).

12. The fact that facial resemblance might require research on the part of the reader does not necessarily indicate that the technique has some inherent flaw. Readers also have

varying levels of familiarity with other objects in the world (I know what a sycamore tree looks like, but not a waxwing), and of lexical competence (can one write “to exuviate” without breaking down communication?).

13. Fieke Schoots has also written about how, in Echenoz’s novels, “L’acte de citer met donc en cause la représentation: celle-ci passe forcément par d’autres représentations de la réalité” (183). Ruth Cruickshank concurs that Echenoz’s intertextual references “seek new ways of bringing the possibility of mimesis . . . into question” (102).

14. Here I understand innovative fiction as a category which, as Richard Walsh has argued, has been usually defined in three ways: “as play, as self-consciousness and as immanence” (*Novel Arguments* viii).

15. Although reflections on representation abound in Ricardou’s work, the most sustained consideration of the subject of cinema and literature is found in the sections entitled “Plume et caméra” and “Page, film, récit” in *Problèmes du nouveau roman*. Ricardou offers the following appraisal of the notion of cinematic literature: “L’on n’assimile plus guère, comme au temps de Lessing, peinture et poésie. Le problème s’est déplacé: l’on préfère aujourd’hui confondre roman et cinéma” (69). Ricardou’s analysis refuses any assimilation of film or text to a representational function, emphasizing instead an approach—undertaken by a “minorité active” of spectators who refuse passive reception (immersion)—that seeks the specificity of each form (88).

16. In terms reminiscent of those employed by Schoots, Petr Dytrt explains the persistent references to film actors by stating that they constitute “une manière désinvolte et ironique de souligner le caractère de copie par lequel le texte, fatalement condamné à ne faire que recopier les textes précédents, étale sa fonction de simulacre” (185). Christine Jérusalem relates the practice to the issue of deindividualization, stating that the recourse to “une identité cinématographique conforme à une norme cinématographique” is evidence of a broader “nauffrage de l’identité” (180).

17. Echenoz’s “émotion visuelle” recalls Dominique Kunz’s notion of a “sentiment d’image,” defined as: “un ‘comme si’ de la vision, un effet d’évocation imaginaire qui naît d’une figuration réelle—discursive ou plastique. Il ne faut le confondre ni avec un véritable voir ni avec le medium” (473).

18. What representational reading, in this model, does is not eliminate the distinction between “perception intramondaine” and “activité imaginaire,” but rather inverts their habitual hierarchy (Schaeffer 180).

19. Dino’s refusal to admit that he is Dean Martin can actually be read as an additional layer of resemblance, as Dean Martin was, according to Echenoz, “un personnage qui, hors de son image sociale . . . était absolument insaisissable, secret” (“La phrase comme dessin” 300).

20. It might be objected that this movement between reference and significance is precisely the phenomenon that Michael Riffaterre observed when he asserted that the referential fallacy is “a valid process in our experiencing of literature,” but one which corresponds to an initial reading that must be abandoned when confronted with the “nonsense” that a referential reading of a poetic text provides (22). My reading of Echenoz refuses a hierarchical ordering which makes mimesis mere background to the poetic indirection of *significance*, as well as the habitual critical moves which consist of praising

this supposedly anti-mimetic gesture as proof of the text's awareness of the "illusions" of popular fiction.

21. One could add to this a third type of experimentation, which brackets meaning and treats the sentence as a material aesthetic object: "la phrase comme objet physique" (Echenoz, "La phrase comme dessin" 311). Once again, however, this materiality of text in no way excludes other forms of signifying literary practice.

22. The present study does not contend that all distinctions between popular and serious fiction are unfounded, but rather that they cannot be grounded primarily in the question of representational or anti-mimetic ambitions.

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