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TELEVISUAL NARRATIVES: TOUSSAINT AND ECHENOZ

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Television is probably at once the most common and the most denigrated medium through which we encounter made images today. It commands much less attention in serious cultural commentary than does cinema; and while the names of thinkers who condemn television come easily to mind, its defenders are harder to find. In France, cultural analysts as diverse as Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Paul Virilio, Marc Augé, Régis Debray, and most recently Stéphane Breton have lined up to attack this mass medium. Yet simultaneously, postmodern artistic practice has embraced it, albeit critically, right from the earliest Fluxus-influenced installations of Nam June Paik or Wolf Vostell in the 1960s, to the integration of video into other art forms (Merce Cunningham's dance choreographies are just one example). As David Harvey pointed out sixteen years ago, the influence of "the era of mass television" is visible not just in the realm of video but throughout postmodern art—in its "attachment to surfaces rather than roots, to collage rather than in-depth work, to superimposed quoted images rather than worked surfaces, to a collapsed sense of time and space rather than solidly achieved cultural artefact" (61). All of this activity is passed over in silence by the thinkers I have just mentioned who are all too quick to assimilate the medium as a whole to its predominantly commercial content. This essay will argue that prose fiction, like theoretical discourse a creation in language, not only provides another way of talking about television in contemporary French culture but is also capable, in the right hands, of drawing formal enrichment from the medium often considered to be its rival if not its conqueror.

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What are the principal criticisms directed at television by the social theorists listed above? Focusing mainly on the kind of real-time programming seen as unique to television, not only discussion programs but especially news bulletins and more especially again live news reportage, all condemn television's elevation of the present moment and consequently its illusory aesthetic of presentation rather than representation,[1] its feigned lack of editorial distance and shaping (which becomes a real lack in unfolding live reportage), and its enslavement to the stream of events in time, events which it moreover constructs in its insatiable need for new content. The report becomes the event, as Régis Debray argues (after McLuhan): "Fabriquant l'événement en même temps que son information, la télé révèle au grand jour que c'est l'information qui fait l'événement, et non l'inverse" (381).

Stéphane Breton's critique of the semiotics of television analyzes the way television's aesthetic of presentation works, and its presuppositions. Taking limit-cases of "empty" images in the specific domain of investigative reporting—blurred shots of anonymous witnesses or mock-ups of documents showing highlighted phrases out of context—he draws more general conclusions on the relationship of image to word in what he calls television's "monstrative" activity. For Breton, television doesn't show, it merely attests that it has something to show: "Nous ne voyons pas la chose, nous voyons la télé montrer la chose" (35). Presence is substituted for meaning—television images simply indicate that meaning is present without actually saying anything, their function being simply decorative: "elles ont la fonction du cache-pot, du faux col, de la perruque. Elles font oublier qu'il n'y a rien à voir" (87). Or they fetishize the talking head which Breton sees as the contemporary secular version of the religious icon in its incarnation of the Word:[2] "Il n'y a pas à la télé de parole sans spectacle du visage. Inversement, toute image doit s'approcher de l'expressivité naturelle d'un visage qui parle" (167). Enslaved to the commentary that accompanies it—"la télé [. . .] asservit l'image à la parole" (255; cp. Debray 383)—the television image is further debased, for its origin in a point of view is routinely concealed. Emblematized in the television weather forecaster who points to a map while seeming not to look at it (in reality seeing it on a concealed screen), language in television points to and explains images which dissimulate the gaze or point of view that produced them.

Empty of meaning, and seemingly dishonest in its pseudo-naturalism, television is above all seen as a dangerous tool of political and social control. Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio scrutinized the instrumental political role of CNN's live news reportage during the first Gulf War.[3] Of the two, Virilio's analysis is the more substantial, Baudrillard focusing more or less exclusively on the compromised nature of the coverage ("mascarade de l'information, avec son chantage à la panique" [Baudrillard 35]) and presenting the war as "montage" and simulacrum, confusing virtual and real time and events to "abolir toute intelligence de l'événement" (74) by the spectator in favor of a

"jouissance hallucinogène" (84) of violence. For Virilio, the viewer is manipulated even more by the temporality of live coverage than by its conflation of "live" with "true." Live coverage only lets the present through. Its impact and immediacy subjugate the viewer more than does the partial or censored nature of particular images. Mastery of the viewer's use of time is just one aspect of a military project to control the "fourth, temporal front" of war (Virilio 107)—the time of the instantaneous communications through which this "first real-time electronic war" was conducted (86). Again, the humble weather forecast plays an emblematic role, with the government-ordered delay in broadcasting Middle East weather news illustrating the manipulation of temporalities, as the "real time" of military operations diverged from the "present" of the CNN viewer. War and television are in any case inextricably linked, for Virilio, by the double function of satellites which collect images of the earth for strategic purposes while beaming a live stream of other video material back down to keep us in front of the set. The satellite is the contemporary version of the lords of the medieval keep, "à la fois maître de l'espace et du temps de sociétés asservies à leur contrôle coutumier" (191). This is more than just a metaphor to Virilio who worries about how power is to be shared when it can be wielded instantaneously, and about whether the attributes of satellite communications technology—ubiquity, instantaneity, omnivoyance and omnipresence, "apanages du divin, autrement dit, de l'autocratie" (192)—are compatible with democracy.

Seen thus as an insidious agent of political control, deceptive and hypnotic, it is little wonder that television is never associated in the discourse of these thinkers with the innovative or subversive potential of art. For Régis Debray, in fact, the transition from cinema to television marks no less than the end of art: "[La frontière] qui sépare le régime 'art' du régime 'visuel' passe entre la pellicule chimique et le ruban magnétique, travelling et zoom, documentaire et grand reportage" (377).[4] He disqualifies the television image from consideration as an art by arguing, essentially, that it doesn't exist, for, as an electrical signal recomposed by the viewer, it has no visual status independent of transmission. There is thus no longer, materially, an image, just coded electrical information (377-8). What Debray laments is that the "doubling" associated traditionally with the image (an image is *of* something) disappears with television technology—rather than the projection of an image stored on a film, the television picture is electrically decoded. Moreover, it emits its own light: "L'image ici a sa lumière incorporée. Elle se révèle elle-même" (382). Both poles of representation are fused, he elaborates, the light pixel "indiquant de soi la structure quantique de l'univers [. . .]; le véhicule et le véhiculé sont homogènes. Nous sommes passés d'une esthétique à une cosmologie" (382). Debray seems to be suggesting that as well as not having an "original" in the traditional sense (but how far is a film frame on a roll of celluloid an "original"?), the television image also lacks a creative "origin" and is

somehow self-producing. The very implausibility of his argument indicates the urgency of his desire to denounce the medium; the paradox is that television in this description ends up sounding like an apotheosis rather than an abandonment of art in the classical sense, the absolute synthesis of form and content (of "véhicule" and "véhiculé"), entirely autonomous and, into the bargain, ideally suited to articulating the post-Einsteinian universe.[5]

Not surprisingly, against such a quasi-divine opponent, the written word has no chance for Debray: "On n'oppose plus valablement un discours à une image" (492). Debray thinks in terms of opposition or confrontation between the media; for Pierre Bourdieu the possibility of collaboration between them is not to be entertained, for television is an entirely corrupting force, luring "romanciers conformes" to produce low-art bestsellers for the mass reading and viewing market (72). Yet right on their cultural doorstep is evidence that the encounter between the novel and television can be other than detrimental to the written medium. Two contemporary Francophone writers who engage in interestingly opposed ways with television's social and aesthetic impact are Jean-Philippe Toussaint and Jean Echenoz. The rest of this essay will sketch the respectively confrontational or more complicit stances they adopt toward the medium, asserting watertight or porous boundaries between it and the novel. While Toussaint grapples head-on with the evolution of the image, broaching the relationship between "high" art (especially painting), photography, and video in novels like *L'appareil-photo* and above all *La télévision*, Echenoz's engagement with visual culture is much more weighted toward the popular and is also more oblique. They form an interestingly contrastive pair, despite superficially having much in common (both are published by Minuit, long an advocate of experimental writing; both are outstanding describers of the everyday; both specialize in somewhat drifting narratives centering on equally drifting male protagonists not far in age from their creators). Television divides them sharply, though, Toussaint condemning it discursively in terms that overlap with the theoretical positions I've just outlined, while Echenoz weaves the ephemera that the medium offers viewers productively through his own implausible fictions in a way that enriches his (and fiction's) stylistic repertoire.

In *La télévision*, television weighs on Toussaint's narrative as a rival to art and literature—the text is part critique of television, part descriptive account of places and events seen by the narrator through the filter of major works of art. The art-historical roll-call is impressive, running through Titian, Da Vinci, Van Eyck, Veronese, Raphaël, Cranach, Dürer, Amberger, Nattier, Largillierre, Raeburn, Boucher, Hoppner, and Fragonard, as well as the more contemporary Pollock, Kienholz, Paik, and Vostell. (While the last two make clear that Toussaint is familiar with video art and thus with the medium's potential, as distinct from its dominant content, his own creative yardstick remains figurative painting.) Art thus infiltrates the fabric of Toussaint's writing and is, surprisingly perhaps, a notable driver of the narrative comedy of *La télévision*.

A good example is the Hulot-esque account of the narrator, an academic on a research fellowship in Berlin to write on Titian Vecellio (a project from which he is forever distracted by the other kind of "TV"), as he navigates the native nude sunbathing culture. Running through this slapstick episode is a veiled reflection on the place of the nude in everyday life, and both strands combine adroitly and comically in a nod to Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, when, on his way for a swim in the park, the naked narrator encounters his source of income, the president of his research fund, with a male companion: "des messieurs élégants qui faisaient lentement le tour du lac" (69). The underachieving would-be creator is suddenly more Victorine than Édouard as his patron brushes the grass from his bare shoulder, even if he resists his immaculately dressed interlocutors' invitation to lunch.

The integration of art into the narrative of *La télévision* is so delicately done that it makes the novel's discursive tirades against television surprising in their formal clash with the fiction. Mini-essays stud the early part of the novel: a Breton-style attack on the televisual "spectacle of representation" produced "incontinently" through blind mechanics opposes it to painting's quest for universality through representation (13-14); another denounces the way television appears to stimulate while in fact anesthetizing the viewer (25-26). While these asides become more narratively integrated as the fiction develops, episodes involving television continue to culminate in judgmental declarations, as Toussaint's narrative persona sheds his air of comic irresolution and resignation in favor of unequivocal condemnation. Thus a light-hearted window-cleaning scene (complete with Pollock comparison) turns darker when the narrator turns his housekeeping attention to the television screen: the drips of dirty window-cleaner falling from the bottom of the screen seem "comme de la merde, ou comme du sang" (121). A belated attempt to rescue his neighbours' plants which he has failed to water (creating a literal *nature morte*, his only achievement during the novel) gives way to a condemnation of television's "counterfeiting" of the passage of time (159). A morning in an East German tower-block apartment, watching television with its occupants, begins as a comic scene but flips over into acid commentary: the only way to watch television is without looking; television's version of reality subtracts three of our senses (202, 205).

This flipping from fiction to polemic may or may not be motivated—it could, at a stretch, be read as mimicking the incongruous contiguities experienced during an evening in front of the TV set, as parodied earlier by the narrator in a three-page list of "zapped" television scenes (22–25). Its effect, though, is to offset the other strand of the narrative, the creative fictional discourse opposed to the anti-television polemic and which, in the quality of its its description of place as well as in its faintly Proustian portrait of the "lost time" of the procrastinating writer, aspires to the status of a figurative art. A loose fictional net certainly remains thrown over the critical strand, for the condemnatory narrator is fallible—his attempt to give up watching television fails after twenty-four hours,

indeed he ends up acquiring a second set—but the degree to which this really relativizes the critique is minimal.

Where Toussaint's fiction is at loggerheads with television and structurally enacts this battle, Echenoz's revels in its tawdry influence, absorbing it as Toussaint's does painting, but in an ironic mode. This is nowhere more evident than in his 1995 novel *Les Grandes Blondes* whose narrative premise is a "where are they now?" television series about faded sex symbols. Its producer's ongoing failure to find an intellectual rationale for a program essentially about sex and voyeurism conveys as grubby a view of the medium as any I have considered so far. But here the critical perspective is entirely absorbed into the fiction and motivated narratively, for it contributes to the characterization of a typical Echenozian protagonist: the lonely middle-aged bachelor oppressed in his work. Similarly, a narrative summary of the adult life of Gloire, the novel's faded pop star, in terms of the contexts in which she has appeared on-screen—variety shows during her brief career; news programs when she is implicated in a murder case; subsequently only when she passed demonstration movie cameras in home electronics stores or on security videos in the métro (86–87)—may nod to the media's manufacturing of shortlived "celebrity" or of "news" as well as to the prevalence of video-surveillance in society. But what we are invited to see on those screens is a human experience of familiar encounters with video (presented in this summary of Gloire's life both as typical television content and as bare medium).

Snippets from news, discussion, or variety programs punctuate virtually all of Echenoz's narratives, their inanity evident. In *Nous trois* a description of live news coverage of a devastating earthquake in Marseille illustrates not so much Baudrillard's or Virilio's concerns with propaganda or the vampirization of viewing time—the character merely glances at it in passing in a café rather than being enslaved to it. Instead Echenoz foregrounds the broadcast's harmless absence of meaning and offers a glimpse of one of his favorite character profiles, an individual (the journalist) not quite up to his professional task and thus incarnating, almost incidentally and in comic mode, contemporary skepticism about the reliability of live journalism in times of crisis:[6]

> Une première synthèse dans notre édition de seize heures, mais j'appelle tout de suite notre correspondant permanent sur place. Meyer empocha sa monnaie. Oui, Jean-Luc, en effet, je me trouve actuellement cours Belsunce, et ce que j'ai sous les yeux ne peut pas se décrire. On ne peut pas le décrire. On ne peut pas. Pourtant, je vais essayer. (*Nous* 83)

If a note of criticism cannot be kept out of the reported snippet from the variety programme that follows—"ce n'est pas si facile pour le pitre d'exposer que, malgré le drame de Marseille qui nous touche tous, le spectacle doit continuer" (99)—the dilution of the presenter's words in the free indirect narrative

discourse is structurally at the opposite pole from Toussaint's quarantining of the content of television in critical asides in *La télévision*. For Echenoz, all such ephemera is grist to the narrative mill, and it is the refraction of the language of the television "plateau" through the prism of the narrative discourse (itself also always amorphous in Echenoz) that transforms it. Stéphane Breton singles out polyphony as the essence of what the novel can do that television cannot, characterized as the latter is by the differentiated voices of the discussion program, without the unifying central hub of narrative to provide synthesis (79–80). For Echenoz, the verbal language of television (which Breton argues dominates its visual language) is just one element of the contemporary social polyphony to be represented in fiction.

But Echenoz's openness to television goes beyond masterful citation, for if the medium's (too often hollow) language expands the polyphonic mix, the narrative in which that mix is suspended is also inflected by the encounter with the formal trademarks of television: the unevaluable and decontextualized snippet, transitions based on contiguity rather than coherent development, and of course the privileging of the illustrative image. Echenoz's style is that of the zapper, the narrative focus hopping from one snatch of overheard, decontextualized dialogue to the next, from one glimpse of an unmotivated scene to another, these latter often visually "enhanced" through an overlay of metaphor (as when, huddled together on park benches in *Lac*, "quelques brochettes d'intérimaires ingèrent de silencieux yaourts" [20]). If this restlessly wandering narrative attention is on one level a parody of the televisual sequence of formulaic moments that Toussaint sees as itself a "grossière parodie" of the passage of time (159), on another it is an acknowledgement and more importantly a representation of the way the culture of zapping has transformed our experience of narrative. Echenoz certainly treats television as a content to be satirized and a representational style to be parodied, but what is most interesting is that he also engages with it as a medium to be transposed into prose. The content of his contextless snippets is identifiably different—overblown or understated—depending on whether they come from television ("Tu vas la perdre, Alex. Elle croit t'aimer" [*Blondes* 210]) or from real life (a minor character worrying about his son's divorce: "Pas sûr que Jean-François supporte sans mal cette séparation" [*Lac* 150]). But in both modes we get a brief glimpse of other stories of which we know nothing and will find out nothing, stories that run in parallel to the one in the frame; in one case trite and implausible pastiches of real life, in the other, poignant and familiar fragments of experience that prose narrative in the age of zapping can accommodate. Sometimes the narrator himself seems to have missed part of an "episode": of two characters whose broken-down car is running again, he claims not to know whether they fixed it themselves or got help (*Blondes* 102). Such alignment with the temporality of the television program is taken to the limit when the end of a tryst is made to coincide with on-screen drama credits (*Lac* 136–7).

Paradoxically, the foregrounding of such televisual elements (and there is also much cinematographic borrowing) contributes to making Echenoz's work very hard to imagine adapted for the screen: the estrangement caused by the transposition of formal features from one medium to another would be lost. By contrast, the coherent, stable perspectives of Toussaint's narrative (a single narrator-protagonist, a sequential temporality), along with his flatly descriptive prose and his fondness for comic anecdote, invite adaptation by privileging the not merely *lisible* but imaginatively *visible* over the non-visual *scriptible* element so central to Echenoz's (nonetheless eventful) narratives. Indeed Toussaint has adapted two of his previous novels, *Monsieur* and *La salle de bains*, for the cinema, television's artistically respectable—though increasingly technologically convergent—elder, and he has also directed original screenplays.

Echenoz's *détournement* of televisual language in the interests of expanding the capacity of prose narrative to accommodate contemporary experiences and modes of awareness reminds us that television is a medium of representation as well as just a content, and that its particular capacities (some of which—filming in real time, action replay, etc.—originated but never flourished in cinema) have necessarily expanded our options for configuring reality in ways that can be fruitful for other forms of cultural expression. As a medium it is (obviously) neither intrinsically good nor bad, just another tool for the organization and interpretation of experience, capable of manipulation by all its users, by producers certainly who can use it to create original work not driven by market forces, but also even by viewers of the commercial product (and of course the two groups overlap). As video artist and critic Douglas Davis put it several years ago, "TV isn't itself anything except a blank tablet. [. . .] The audience for television is no worse or better than the audience for print, or for painting. [. . .] The viewers are not mesmerized morons but feeling, thinking, alienated human beings" (101). Moreover, according to a study by Jacques Perriault, viewers generally use television less to acquire content than for contact, as a "simulacre de présence" (229) or as a fulcrum for interpersonal connections. This role as a "social glue," however impoverished, is emphasized too by communications theorist Dominique Wolton who also draws attention to the unpredictable "nomadic" behavior of viewers (97, 105).[7] Hence, perhaps, its infiltration of Echenoz's narratives which are all about ephemeral connections along meandering narrative trajectories (connections between people but also, through metaphor, between all kinds of things—women on a bench and kebabs, for example); and the fact that we all recognize the media references proves the connections and enacts them afresh. There are obviously much more radically manipulative viewing possibilities: the late Nam June Paik, alluded to by Toussaint, hung televisions from the ceiling or laid them face-up on the floor to change the way viewers approach the television image. Other creators have infiltrated the schedules to question television's function *in medias res*.[8] Commentators who present the viewing public as the passive victims of an autocratic force ("crédules, dociles, et passifs" for

Debray [450]),[9] are, like Echenoz's zapping narrator—for like him, they do obviously watch television—missing part of the story.

Notes

1 In live reportage, for Régis Debray, "l'image [. . .] s'abolit comme image fabriquée, la présence pseudo-naturelle se nie comme représentation" (Debray 481). Pre-recorded discussion programmes too, as Stéphane Breton points out, present a simulacrum of immediacy, with studio audiences and direct addresses to the viewer concealing the fact that "le spectacle est irrémédiablement divisé puisque le spectateur absent ne peut répondre" (Breton 189).

2 Compare Debray: "On n'a jamais vu le Christ de dos. Poivre d'Arvor et Dan Rather non plus" (414); for him, however, "ces hommes-troncs ne sont pas le Verbe mais le Réel incarné, c'est-à-dire l'Événement dans sa lumineuse Vérité."

3 The coverage of this war is a frequent touchstone for criticism of the medium; see also Debray (478) and Augé (*Guerre* 164–5).

4 Augé makes a similar claim in *La Guerre des rêves*, arguing, via Christian Metz, cinema's greater ability to convey an authorial vision (132–50).

5 The paradox may be partly explained by the considerable influence of McLuhan in Debray's analysis, yet shorn of the former's enthusiasm or his emphasis on the viewer's active role in reconstituting the image from the wealth of pixels flashing past.

6 See for example Virilio on the compromised situation of the embedded journalist, relegated to the same position as the viewer, "puisqu'il découvre les images en même temps que lui, au moment même où les uns et les autres les leur balancent" (132). Jean Cluzel, founder of the *Cahiers de l'audiovisuel*, has also condemned the compromised independence of contemporary war coverage (88).

7 In 1985 Marc Augé made a similar point about television's social function and also emphasized viewers' nomadic habits (*Traversée* 25); he has since become more hostile to the medium (see *La Guerre des rêves* 159–65).

8 For example Jan Dibbets's "TV as a fireplace," a short film of an open fire included in the schedule of German station WDR over Christmas 1969. The idea was revisited by Susan Hiller in 1986 on the UK's Channel 4: her "fire" film "Belshazzar's Feast" suggested that, like the glowing hearth, television is also a trigger for the imagination.

9 Debray presents us with a remarkable sketch of the "subjects" produced by television, conservative, *arrivistes*, cynical yet malleable, incapable of criticism or logical abstraction, devoid of memory, distance, or long-term vision (449–51).

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