

## **Planes, Trains, Automobiles ... and Space Shuttles. Travel in the fiction of Jean Echenoz**

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Since 1979, when his first novel was published, the formidable talent of Jean Echenoz has gained widespread recognition from readers, the media and the literary establishment in France. He has won many literary prizes, including the Prix Goncourt, which he was awarded in 1999 for *Je M'en Vais*. He can best be described as a contemporary storyteller with a complex, ironic, subversive style that is full of quirky, incisive humour. His early novels, parodies of the adventure, spy and detective genres, contained a plethora of fast-moving, essentially pointless, plots; in recent years, however, he has begun to move away from genre writing in order to explore a wider range of issues. From the outset, his novels have been published by Editions de Minuit, one of France's most prestigious and intellectual publishing houses, famous for nurturing the writers of the Nouveau Roman in the 1950s and 60s. Echenoz has become associated with the so-called 'nouvelle génération de Minuit', alongside writers such as Eric Chevillard, Patrick Deville and Jean-Philippe Toussaint; together they have become loosely classified as minimalist writers because of their commitment to the form of the novel, rather than its content. Travel, in the broadest sense possible, is a theme that runs throughout Echenoz's work, for his characters rarely remain in one place for long. They are constantly on the move, be it around Paris, to various parts of France, to the four corners of the world or even further afield into space. In his most recently published novel *Au Piano* (2003), a late-night mugging even propels the main protagonist onto man's ultimate journey: beyond death.

So why is so much time spent travelling in the novels of Echenoz? We must consider this question in the context of the writer's own aspirations:

Je voudrais grosso modo travailler à une tentative modeste de description du monde... Ce serait un moyen de me rapprocher encore un peu plus de... la réalité.<sup>1</sup>

Je ne peux pas concevoir un roman sans mouvement, sans qu'il passe par des lieux qui... possèdent une pertinence romanesque... un endroit générateur. Qui n'a pas seulement une existence réelle, mais qui a aussi et surtout – pour moi – une existence romanesque évidente.<sup>2</sup>

It is because of its potential for providing an infinite variety of stimulating locations for novelistic creation, that will also help bring him closer to reality, that Echenoz places travel at the very heart of his work. The places where he finds inspiration are many and varied - the Greenwich meridian, the rubber plantations of Malaysia, isolated Arctic communities, the city of Iquitos in Peru. The inspiration they provide is equally varied and its effects can be observed across all aspects of Echenoz's style. His novels are characteristically compact yet they 'cover a lot of ground', both literally and figuratively, so he makes no attempt to give global descriptions of the places which fire his imagination; instead he focuses on a particular, often quirky aspect, such as the Australian sun in *Les Grandes Blondes* (1995), in order to give an impression of the place.

Bain de soleil sous écran total.

Car le soleil australien n'est pas un soleil comme les autres. Il vous brûle avant de vous réchauffer, chalumeau vengeur meme par temps frais.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Broadly speaking, I would like to make a modest attempt at describing the world. That would be one way for me to get closer to...reality.' Olivier Bessard-Banquy, 'Il se passe quelque chose avec le jazz', *Europe*, vol. 820-821 (1997), p. 202. All translations given in footnotes are by Monique Galloway.

<sup>2</sup> 'I cannot conceive of a novel without movement, without it moving through places which...possess novelistic significance... a generative location. Which not only exists in reality but, most importantly for me, which possess an obvious novelistic reality.' M. Rémy, Interview with Jean Echenoz, *Zoey* magazine, no. 3, (2003) quoted in Les Editions de Minuit website dossier [www.leseditionsdeminuit.fr/titres/2003/au-piano.htm](http://www.leseditionsdeminuit.fr/titres/2003/au-piano.htm) [accessed on 6.01.04.]

<sup>3</sup> 'Sunbathed using total sun block. For the Australian sun is not like other suns. It burns you before making you feel warm, even in chilly weather it is like a powerful blowtorch.' Jean Echenoz, *Les Grandes Blondes* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1995), p. 98.

Moreover, he sometimes allows a particular location to act as a launching pad for a narrative interlude on topics which may be totally unrelated to the story such as the simoun wind which blows across the Sahara.

Le simoun, vent très chaud, se lève par bourrasques au sud du Maroc saharien [...] Le simoun reconstruit le désert, exproprie les dunes, rhabille les oasis, le sable éparpillé va s'introduire profondément partout jusque sous l'ongle du bédouin, dans le turban du Touareg et l'anus de son dromédaire.<sup>4</sup>

But his interest extends to far more than the physical world: 'Je ne cherche pas seulement à parler du monde. Je ne peux que décrire des personnages en rapport, en relation avec le monde... non sans tenir compte de la position du sujet moderne dans le monde contemporain'.<sup>5</sup> So it is the relationship between his fictional characters (taken as representatives of contemporary Man) and the world they (and we) inhabit which provides the basis of Echenoz's fiction.

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, critical thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard have engaged in the debate about the nature of postmodern society and man's position within it. Lyotard argued that the global spread of capitalism and huge advances in science and technology post-World War 2 led to the end of ideologies such as Marxism and the loss of credibility of the grand narrative through which belief in the value of history and progress had prevailed. Along with the collapse of stable social structures (including the traditional family in the West), these factors resulted in the emergence of a fragmented, ungrounded social field in which the individual's identity was dispersed. The chaotic, incessant motion in

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<sup>4</sup> 'The simoun, a very hot wind, comes in gusts from the Moroccan Sahara. The simoun reconfigures the desert, expropriates the dunes, changes the oasis, the scattered sand works its way into everything, under the Bedouin's nails, in the Touareg's turban and up the anus of his dromedary.' Jean Echenoz, *Nous Trois* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1992), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> 'I am not just trying to talk about the world. I can only describe characters in the context of their relations with the world, taking into account the situation of the modern subject in the contemporary world.' Bessard-Banquy, p. 195.

which Echenoz's characters are engaged can thus be associated with Jean-François Lyotard's notion of '...une masse composée d'atomes individuels lancés dans un absurde mouvement brownien'.<sup>6</sup> Echenoz has said that whilst others write historical novels, he tries to create geographical novels. This geographical approach underlines the fact that the world seems to be shrinking before our very eyes, as rapid means of transport allow people to travel and live just about anywhere they like. Images of places, events and people worldwide ('history' in the making) are beamed right into homes and globalisation in its broadest sense spreads people and ideas throughout the world. As a result, wherever they are, individuals are bombarded with myriad collective signals of contemporary society which they must try to interpret for themselves. Individuals need new ways of making sense of life and of their place in the world; they need to redevelop their sense of identity.

The confused sense of identity of the vast majority of Echenoz's characters (many of them operate under at least one pseudonym) is a striking feature of his work with which the motif of travel is closely intertwined. By contrast with the model on which society was based until the twentieth century where most people were born, lived and died within the same geographical community centred on the family, today's society is highly mobile, leading to families becoming geographically scattered and individuals losing awareness of their roots. The characters in Echenoz's novels live extremely mobile, almost nomadic lifestyles; their family background is hardly ever referred to and seems a very insignificant aspect of their lives:

Le lendemain matin, de fait, Ferrer se sentait un peu plus en forme. Il passa un moment à se demander qui, parmi son entourage, il pourrait informer de son état... Il préféra...ne pas risquer d'inquiéter sa famille qui lui semblait de toute

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<sup>6</sup> '...a mass of individual atoms launched into an absurd Brownian motion'. Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979), p. 31.

manière être devenue un archipel très épars et lointain, peu à peu submergé par la montée des eaux.<sup>7</sup>

As a result they lack many of the stable points of reference which contributed to the sense of identity generally enjoyed by previous generations. Yet, wherever they travel they are confronted with the signals and rituals imposed by modern consumerist society – even in space the astronauts in *Nous Trois* (1992) make celebrity TV appearances as the spaceship passes over Honolulu (for which they don exotic patterned shirts and sunglasses and play the ukulele) and then Russia. As individuals, characters must try to assign meaning to all these signals and to decide how they fit into this brave new globalised society. A more ‘down to earth’ illustration of this occurs in the passage from *Au Piano* (2003) where Max is on the metro and observes the flats and their occupants as he passes by them.<sup>8</sup> The picture that emerges is of a heterogeneous society in which people’s lives are dominated by the accumulation of goods, which are simply discarded as soon as they cease to function. A feeling of solitary unease and loneliness pervades the scene: the women leaning on their balconies seem apathetic, the men on the train are alone and watch the women watching them. Unease is a feeling that blights many characters in their attempts at communication and social interaction; Max looks at the men sitting opposite him on the metro, but soon decides that a closer inspection of his ticket is a more attractive proposition than risking having to communicate with his fellow man.

J-F Lyotard would have recognised the attitudes and feelings described above as a typical expression of the unstable, fragmented identity of man in postmodern society. More recently they have been linked by the

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<sup>7</sup>Next morning, in fact, Ferrar felt better. He spent a while wondering who, of those close to him, he could inform regarding his state of health...He decided not to risk worrying his family who, in any case, seemed to have become a scattered and distant archipelago, which was gradually disappearing beneath the rising waters.’ Jean Echenoz, *Je M’en Vais* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1999), p. 149.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Echenoz, *Au Piano* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2003), pp. 69-71.

ethnologist Marc Augé in his 1992 book *Non-Lieux*<sup>9</sup> to a process of acceleration and excess in the domains of time, space and identity, which has occurred over the last quarter of the twentieth century. The product of this process, according to Augé, is supermodernity (*la surmodernité*), which can be thought of as ‘the face of a coin whose obverse represents postmodernity: the positive of a negative’.<sup>10</sup> Supermodernity produces the non-place (*non-lieu*), an antithesis to the widely recognised notion of anthropological place (i.e. a place of identity, of relations and of history). Much of the action in Echenoz novels takes place in Paris, which is presented with deep affection as the archetypal anthropological place. Practically all the novels begin and end there, and considerable emphasis is placed on the frequent journeys made by characters within the boundaries (the *boulevard périphérique*) of the city; a trip round Paris is a figurative trip round large parts of France and Europe and into France’s history. Echenoz refers to many streets and metro stations in Paris, providing the potential for endless imaginary journeys by the reader – Rue de Rome, Place de l’Europe, Boulevard de Strasbourg, Porte d’Ivry, le Pont-Neuf, Alésia, Bastille, Solférino, the list is endless. From time to time he also explores aspects of the vibrant diversity of local life in the *arrondissements* of Paris:

Il habitait tout en bas de la rue Oberkampf, dans un immeuble jouxtant le Cirque d’Hiver. Les locataires étaient d’une grande diversité de provenances...Chaque instant était un contrepoint de paroles et musiques égyptiennes, coréennes ou portugaises, serbes et sénégalaises qui se nouaient entre elles [...] et aux fumets polychromes des cuisines de l’immeuble dont les fenêtres ouvertes laissaient aussi jaillir les conversations vives à la lueur des ampoules nues, se superposait l’arôme épicé de la ménagerie, comme une olive dans le martini.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places, Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London: Verso, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> ‘He lived at the very bottom of Rue Oberkampf, in an apartment block adjoining the Cirque d’Hiver zoo. The tenants originated from a wide variety of places...Every moment contained counterpoints of Egyptian, Korean and Portuguese, Serb or Senegalese words and

Airports, motorways and their service stations, supermarkets, ATMs, hotel chains, planes, trains and automobiles – all these are non-places which keep people and goods moving rapidly round the world, which have no localised identity and where communication is minimal and largely automated. In *Lac* (1989) Suzy passes through a suburban shopping centre where the atmosphere is bleak and sterile and people seem aware of being vaguely out of place:

Tous ont l'air fatigués d'affronter, ou de ne plus pouvoir affronter quelque chose – mais c'est peut-être une impression, raisonne Suzy, c'est peut-être moi – à l'exception du pharmacien, petit homme efficace et vif barré d'un rai de moustache, bien épanoui sur cet humus riche en produits tranquillisants.<sup>12</sup>

In *Je M'en Vais* (1999), Ferrer arrives at the airport far too early for the flight which will take him to Montreal en route to the Arctic, providing a perfect opportunity for a narrative interlude reflecting on the nature of the airport itself:

un aéroport n'existe pas en soi. Ce n'est qu'un lieu de passage, un sas, une fragile façade au milieu d'une plaine[...] une plaque tournante infestée de courants d'air qui charrient une grande variété de corpuscules aux innombrables origines....<sup>13</sup>

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music [...] and on top of the polychromatic aromas coming from the kitchens in the apartment block, whose open windows also allowed lively conversations conducted under bare light bulbs to spill out, was superimposed the piquant smell of the zoo, just like the olive in a martini.' Jean Echenoz, *Cherokee* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1983), pp. 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> 'They all look tired of facing up to things, or of being unable to face up to something-but maybe that's just an impression, reasons Suzy, maybe it's just me-apart from the chemist, a small, lively, efficient-looking man with a slim, straight moustache, who thrives in this tranquiliser-rich medium.' Jean Echenoz, *Lac* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1989), p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> '...an airport does not exist intrinsically. It is merely a passageway, a conduit, a fragile façade in the middle of a plain, a turntable infested by draughts bearing wide variety of corpuscles of diverse origins...' Jean Echenoz, *Je M'en Vais* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1999), p. 10.

We have here not only an accurate definition of an airport as a non-place, but also of the alienating effect it has on the person passing through it. Similarly, in *Nous Trois* (published the same year as *Non-Lieux*), the way the spaceship and its crew are presented, suggest that it too could be considered a type of non-place. The difference between this and the previous two examples is that here Echenoz makes it very clear that this is imaginative fiction and therefore bears no direct relation to reality - he can thus be said to be fashioning a fictional non-place. In *Au Piano*, he takes the notion one big step further. After his untimely death, Max finds himself in 'une sorte de centre d'orientation spécialisé[...]quelque chose comme un Centre de tri qui allait statuer sur son sort'.<sup>14</sup> The building, apparently a cross between a hospital and a hotel, is large and impersonal, with endless corridors and numerous lifts, staircases and revolving doors; Max's room could easily be any room in an international hotel chain, except that it has no windows and no mirrors. People pass through here after death to have any injuries fixed, to be told to which of the two permanent locations they are being assigned (*le Parc* or *la section urbaine*) and to be given new identities as appropriate. As this is an imaginative creation, it is impossible to pinpoint the location of the Centre in time or space and this reinforces the feeling that this too is a fictional non-place.

By their nature, non-places lack the possibility for social interaction between individuals or expression of their singular (as opposed to collective) identity. Individuals, Augé argues, therefore experience supermodernity as solitude and many characters in Echenoz novels live an essentially solitary existence. That and travel are often used as an opportunity for characters to reinvent themselves. For example, Gloire in *Les Grandes Blondes* changes identity several times, transforming herself from a glamorous singer to an unkempt, unpleasant loner and back again. Characters often express this solitude as boredom, irrespective of whether

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<sup>14</sup> '...a kind of specialised training centre...something like a Sorting Office which would decide his fate.' Echenoz, *Au Piano*, pp. 94-95.



they are situated at home in Paris or in the most exotic, exciting places in the world. Felix Ferrer, like Gloire, frequently feels that the passage of time is painfully slow, like ‘un perpétuel dimanche’. The feelings of boredom expressed by Echenoz’s characters are linked to the way they experience everyday life (*le quotidien*). Their daily routine at home in Paris, which is of course heavily influenced by consumerist society, is described thus:

toutes les journées de Félix Ferrer, sauf le dimanche s’étaient déroulées de la même manière. Levé à sept heures trente [...] il préparait [...] pour Suzanne et lui-même un petit déjeuner scientifiquement dose en vitamines et sels minéraux. Il procédait alors à vingt minutes de gymnastique en écoutant la revue de presse à la radio [...] Après quoi Ferrer, dans la salle de bains, se brossait les dents jusqu’à l’hémorragie sans jamais se regarder dans la glace [...] S’y lavait toujours dans le même ordre, immuablement de gauche à droite et de bas en haut. S’y rasait toujours dans le même ordre...<sup>15</sup>

The image created here is of people who experience the everyday not in the creative sense imagined by Henri Lefebvre or Michel de Certeau, but in the passive manner in which Maurice Blanchot envisages it:

rien ne se passe, voilà le quotidien, mais quel est le sens de ce mouvement immobile...Le quotidien est le mouvement par lequel l’homme se retient comme à son insu dans l’anonymat humain.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> ‘...everyone of Ferrer’s days, except for Sundays, had been the same. Up at 7.30...he prepared breakfast, with scientifically dosed vitamins and minerals, for himself and Suzanne. Then he did twenty minutes of exercises while listening to the newspaper round up on the radio... After which, in the bathroom, Felix would brush his teeth until his gums bled, without looking at himself in the mirror...He would always wash methodically, immutably from left to right and from bottom to top. He would always shave methodically...’ Echenoz, *Je M’en Vais*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> ‘nothing happens, such is the everyday, but what is the meaning of this immobile motion?... The everyday is the motion by which Man remains, apparently without realising it, in human anonymity.’ Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard NRF, 1969), pp. 355-66.

However, their experience of the everyday is not limited to the times when they are at home; wherever they happen to be for more than a day or two, they fall into a routine which rapidly leads to the onset of boredom and a degree of apathy. Characters are so conditioned by their daily lives in Paris that, regardless of where they may travel to, they are unable to experience or learn from anything different. The everyday routine to which they return at home becomes comfortable and reassuring; it could be said that in this way Echenoz lends a form of positive value to the everyday.

In general, Echenoz's characters are passive rather than proactive, so they rarely embark on journeys on their own initiative; there is always an external reason which imposes the need for travel (or so characters perceive). There is reasonably clear factual justification for every journey but often there is little real motivation or enthusiasm on the part of characters whose sense of identity, as we have seen, is confused by the conflicting signals of postmodern society. The justification for journeys can be roughly divided into two categories. The first is when characters travel for what can loosely be termed 'business' reasons, which may be more or less legitimate and compelling. Thus, Franck Chopin, the part-time spy in *Lac*, travels to a hotel in the country where he equips the flies he is studying in his other job as a research scientist with miniature microphones to help him observe an Eastern bloc spy who is staying at the hotel! Felix Ferrer in *Je M'en Vais* travels to the Arctic to search for a consignment of rare Inuit artefacts reputed to be on board a ship which disappeared in 1957. In these instances, travel is a gateway to excitement and adventure and is used as a diegetic tool to advance the plot. The second and most frequently encountered reason for characters setting off on a journey is to run away from someone or something. This is one aspect of the theme of absence through disappearance or abandonment which is central to Echenoz's oeuvre and which he explores from many different angles. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Je M'en Vais*, meaning 'I'm leaving', with its identical title,

opening and closing lines. At the beginning of the novel Ferrer leaves his wife, during it Ferrer's girlfriend Victoire inexplicably runs away, then his employee runs away after stealing his property and the end is marked by a far more mundane but personally significant departure, that of Ferrer from a party. Echenoz designs his plots to explore each situation from a different point of view, either from that of the person being abandoned or that of the person who has run away. *Je M'en Vais* is written largely from the point of view of Ferrer, but *Un An* (1997), which is its 'sister' text, follows Victoire during the year she spends wandering, homeless and aimless, round the west of France.

Another aspect of the theme of disappearance is illustrated by characters who chase after people who have disappeared. In *Cherokee* (1983) Georges Chave becomes obsessed with the need to find a woman he meets fleetingly in a Paris library; he searches all over Paris and even goes to Belgium to follow up a tenuous lead dating back to her childhood; at the same time detectives pursue Chave through France. In *Au Piano*, Max Delmarc spends much of his life searching for a woman called Rose with whom he fell in love thirty years ago; her absence colours his entire outlook on life and continues to haunt him after his death.

When it comes to the destination for their journeys, Echenoz's characters never make an active choice. Sometimes the destination is dictated by the events/needs of the story - for example the Inuit artefacts Ferrer wants are located in the Arctic - but often destinations are fixed more or less by coincidence. In *Les Grandes Blondes* Gloire knows that she wants to get as far away from France as possible after killing a private detective who has been following her but the only reason she goes to Australia is because her lawyer makes a passing reference to it. Victoire in *Un An* leaves the decision to chance, but seems to distrust and therefore alters the random choice:

Histoire de brouiller les pistes, sans trop savoir pour qui, trois fois Victoire tira au sort ces destinations puis, comme chaque fois sortait Auch, pour à ses propres yeux les brouiller mieux encore, elle choisit Saint-Jean-de-Luz.<sup>17</sup>

Her choice is neither truly active nor truly random and provides another illustration of the confused, directionless behaviour of so many characters in Echenoz's books.

In the novels of Echenoz as much weight is given to the journey as to the events which may happen once the destination has been reached. The modes of travel are appropriate to and as varied as the destinations. Characters travel round Paris on foot, by car or on the métro, round France on the train or by car, further afield by plane or cargo ship, to the Arctic on an ice-breaker and through the Arctic on horse drawn sledges and skidoos; they even orbit the earth in a space ship in *Nous Trois*. Once they are en route, Echenoz often takes advantage of the narrative pause which the journey affords to allow his characters to see, even though they may not notice, their surroundings and to catch fleeting insights into the everyday lives of people past whom they travel. However, it is the narrator (who is often close to the authorial voice), not characters, who pay considerable attention to weather conditions and natural phenomena, such as the simoun wind referred to earlier, in the places through which characters pass on their travels. Once they arrive, or at least stop travelling, characters are not interested in behaving like tourists, visiting places of interest or observing differences of culture; for example, in Australia :

Gloire ne verrait là-bas nul kangourou ni koala ni rien. Juste un soir, dans un caniveau d'Exhibition Street, elle apercevrait une dépouille d'opossum gisant entre le pare-chocs avant

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<sup>17</sup> 'In order to cover her tracks, she knew not from whom, Victoire drew lots three times for these destinations, then because Auch came out every time, so as to cover her tracks even better, she picked on St Jean de Luz.' Jean Echenoz, *Un An* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1997), p. 13.

d'une Holden Commodore et le pare-chocs arrière d'une Holden Apollo.<sup>18</sup>

Gloire does not see any of the native animals which are traditionally associated with Australia, she just sees a (significantly) dead possum caught between two cars which can be seen as symbolising Australian consumerism in the postmodern era. Given this blinkered approach, travel has at best a limited and temporary effect on Echenoz's characters. Events that occur whilst characters are on their travels may affect their subsequent actions, (Gloire decides it is time to leave Sydney soon after pushing a man off a bridge) but not their fundamental outlook on life (she feels no remorse).

This article has examined the many functions of travel in the work of Jean Echenoz. In the first instance, travel provides an unending source of inspiration for his idiosyncratic, vibrant and occasionally fanciful descriptions of places. However, whilst much of their time is spent away from their home city of Paris, his characters clearly do not share his passion for travel (either real or figurative) as a source of enriching experiences. They lack real motivation or enthusiasm for travel of any sort; they neither actively plan their travels, nor derive any discernible benefit from them; in fact, the impression given is that characters in Echenoz's novels only feel secure and at ease when they are at home. Yet travel they must, for travel not only provides the variety of locations that enables him to deploy his impressionistic style of writing to best effect, but it also allows him to develop the theme of absence through disappearance or abandonment that has figured in each of his novels to date. Even more significant is the fact that wherever Echenoz characters may go, they frequently pass through the soulless non-places, such as airports and shopping centres identified by Marc Augé and which are the antithesis of the notion of anthropological

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<sup>18</sup>'Whilst over there, Gloire would see no kangaroos, no koalas, nothing. Just once, at night, would she catch sight of the remains of a possum lying in the gutter on Exhibition Street, caught between the front bumper of a Holden Commodore and the rear bumper of a Holden Apollo.' Echenoz, *Les Grandes Blondes*, p. 93.

place (Paris is ever-present in the background of every Echenoz novel as a counter-balance to the slightly oppressive presence of so many non-places). This and the fact that characters are surrounded by globalised consumerism wherever they go, results in them experiencing feelings of solitude, unease and alienation that contribute to a confused, fractured sense of identity. All these factors combine to form a picture of life in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century - what Jean-François Lyotard has labelled the Postmodern Condition. It thus becomes clear that Echenoz uses the theme of travel as an effective framework on which to construct a vivid image of the impact postmodern society is having on Man's frame of mind and consequently his patterns of behaviour. Overall then, it can be said that with every novel he writes, Jean Echenoz is building and constantly refining a detailed allegory of man's place within postmodern society. He gives each novel a unique (and often multiple) geographical setting and in this way his fiction has transported readers all over the world and beyond, making the dimension of travel arguably one of the most attractive aspects of his work.

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