

Marina Ortrud Hertrampf (Passau)

Between Graphic Travelogue and Ethical Discussion of the Anthropocene or the History of Nuclear Power in France: *Le droit du sol. Journal d'un vertige* by Étienne Davodeau

Abstract

This article deals with the graphic novel *Droit du sol. Journal d'un vertige* (2021) by the French graphic novelist Étienne Davodeau, published in 2021. The album inscribes itself both into the literary tradition of the author wandering through France's landscapes and into the current trend of docufiction and graphic reportage. The article elaborates on the extent to which Davodeau, by mixing a personal travelogue with an ecocritical docufiction, creates a particularly powerful reflection on the anthropocentric exploitation of nature as well as on the visible, aesthetic and invisible, destructive traces that humans leave in the world.

In 2011, Yuval Noah Harari presented with *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind* a graphic novel that depicts human history in a way that is as unusual as it is complex and transdisciplinary, and puts forward the provocative argument that *homo sapiens* may dominate the planet, but the capitalist and anthropocentric exploitation of nature by no means makes us happier than our ancient ancestors.¹ In 2021, French graphic novelist Étienne Davodeau² published *Le droit du sol. Journal d'un vertige*, a graphic novel that indirectly takes up many of Harari's ideas and transforms them into a mixture of autofictional travelogue and ethical reflection on the history of the Anthropocene. Davodeau's work focusses particularly on an ecocritical discussion of environmental destruction, climate change, and nuclear energy.

The humorous and critical attitude of Davodeau's volume is already evident in the title, as it refers ambiguously to the *droit du sol*, that is, the *ius soli*, or the right to citizenship by birth that, in fact, applies in France. Owing to this connections, the title refers to the central ethical question of the right of humans to intervene in the earth's geology and ecosystem by pure virtue of their existence: the work is thus about the supposed man's right – to speak biblically – to "subjugate the earth," or, to put it another way, it is about man's unquestioned right to manipulate and exploit the earth and, finally, to destroy it for egocentric economic reasons in such a way

¹ Yuval Noah Harari (*1976) is an Israeli professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is the author of the popular science bestsellers *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, originally published in 2011 and translated into English in 2014. In fact, the book surveys the entire length of human history, from the evolution of *Homo sapiens* in the Stone Age up to the political and technological revolutions of the 21st century. In doing so it focuses on key processes that shaped humankind and the world around it, such as the advent of agriculture, the creation of money, the spread of religion, and the rise of the nation state. To attract an even wider readership, he collaborated with well-known francophone comic artists David Vandermeulen (*1968) as co-author and Daniel Casanave (*1963) as illustrator to present the graphic adaptation in two volumes: *Sapiens: A Graphic History, Volume 1 – The Birth of Humankind* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2020) and *Sapiens: A Graphic History, Volume 2 – The Pillars of Civilization* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2021).

² Étienne Davodeau (*1965) is one of the great French comic authors of our time. After studying fine arts, he founded a drawing studio and began publishing comic reports early on. Numerous of his often clearly socially critical albums have received awards and prizes. His latest comic reportage, which is the main subject of this paper, became a bestseller in France.

that the life of future generations of humans, flora, and fauna may be made impossible.³

Interestingly, two more docufictional graphic novels dealing with the climatic consequences of excessive environmental destruction were published in 2021: *Le Monde sans fin, miracle énergétique et dérive climatique* (Dargaud, 2021) by Jean-Marc Jancovici and Christophe Blain and *Urgence climatique: Il est encore temps!* (Casterman, 2021) by Étienne Lécroart and Ivar Ekeland. Unlike these two works, however, a very personal component also plays a decisive role in *Droit du sol*, because Davodeau's graphic novel writes itself into the literary tradition of wandering through nature, which reached its first milestones with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (written between 1776 and 1778, published posthumously in 1782) and Alphonse de Lamartine's *Méditations poétiques* (1820).⁴

In fact, Davodeau's work is a kind of autobiographical project experiment in which the illustrator-author and protagonist graphically records his experiences during an unusual *Tour de France*. Unlike Jules Michelet's historiographical "Tableau de France" (1833)⁵ or Augustine Fouillée's patriotic-didactic *Le tour de la France par deux enfants* (1877)⁶, Davodeau's journey is not to celebrate the greatness of the *Grande Nation*. Thus, more indebted to the romantic spirit of Rousseau, who was critical of civilisation, Davodeau rather traverses France without seeking the achievements of French civilisation. Quite the opposite, Davodeau wanders far off the beaten track to find the few places of French cultural landscapes where the originality of nature can still be sensed. Davodeau's physical and mental journey through time and space is also a search for himself and his place in the Anthropocene; furthermore, that journey serves not only to define the subjective ego, but also to determine the position of the human being in general in the world. This externalised objective is expressed through the conceptual design of the journey's itinerary (see fig.1).



Fig. 1: Davodeau's tour de France (based on Davodeau 2021: 1)

³ The fact that the economic exploitation of nature, which is all too often disrespectful of creation, also bears hegemonic-postcolonial traits is illustrated by Joe Sacco in his ecocritical graphic documentary *Paying the Land* (Metropolitan Books, 2020), which reports on the effects and consequences of fracking in the Northwestern Territory on and for the indigenous people.

⁴ On the literary motif of wandering and walking, see Gros (2015), Jung (2020) and Albes (1998).

⁵ Although Michelet can be located in the Romantic period, he, unlike Rousseau or Lamartine, does not turn to natural landscapes in order to discover the expression of his soul in them. Michelet hardly attaches any particular value to 'wild' and 'uncultivated' nature. Rather, he seeks the French national soul primarily where man has left traces. Cf. Hertrampf (2013).

⁶ The school textbook was published under the pseudonym G. Bruno and influenced several generations of French citizens. See Ozouf (1997).

This strong conceptual structure of the project is, however, also remotely reminiscent of conceptual art and situationism insofar as pure art is to be overcome in favour of a widely receivable political message, and the aesthetic design, which is undoubtedly sophisticated in terms of drawing, serves above all to make an ethical discourse visible. Likewise, the conception of Davodeau's journey enables to experience the relationship of humans to their environment in the course of the Anthropocene. On the bookcover readers find the following message: "Relier en marchant, deux lieux, deux actes pour les mettre en résonance. Les peintures rupestres de Pech Merle, dans le Lot, et le projet d'enfouissement de déchets nucléaires à Bure, dans la Meuse."

The first six pages resemble a prologue clarifying the idea of the journey. The first page, with its full-page panel, opens with a pun; on the one hand, it is quite literally a travelling journey actually completed in the present; on the other hand and simultaneously, the graphic hyperbole of the view of the earth from space suggests that it is a symbolic journey, i.e. in this case, specifically a journey in time through the history of humankind, which connects a striking milestone of human presence visible to this day with a place that will possibly leave traces of human existence far beyond the existence of life. In fact, the concept of the journey to which the author explicitly invites the reader in the familiar you-form – "Un voyage auquel, lectrice, lecteur, je t'invite." (Davodeau 2021: 6) – is clarified in the following pages. Actually, the address to the reader is of great functional importance, as it explicitly takes the recipient along as a travel companion. This shows the intention to trigger a lasting process of reflection in the reader. In this way, the graphic novel inscribes itself in the current of contemporary "involved literature" that has grown out of Jean-Paul Sartre's engaged literature. The different manifestations of "involved literature" refrain from formulating prefabricated theses or explicitly formulating political-ideological opinions and evaluations and instead focus on investigating and revealing the true conditions (cf. Viart 2006: 199).

On the graphic level, the zoom technique is striking, literally drawing the reader into the depth dimension of the subject matter. From the cosmic macro-view we set out to the micro-view, which leads to the caves of Pech Merle with the drawings of prehistoric ancestors below the surface of the earth. There, the focus is shifted from the half-total depictions of the famous bison, mammoths, and horses to the close-up of a mammoth (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Davodeau's zoom technique (Davodeau 2021: 6-10)

Two further aspects attract the reader's attention here: First, the fact that the graphic novel presents a journey through France is considered insignificant; given the intention to trace human history *paris pro toto* by means of a concrete example, this seems only logical. At the same time, this insignificance underlines the universality of what is narrated and reflected – even though readers will see later that Davodeau's work does have a strong French reference against the background of France being one of the world's leading nations in nuclear energy production.

Second, Davodeau plays with the spectrum of meanings of "trace," and thus refers meta-referentially to the concept of his journey and at the same time to the medium of the ninth art: "Alors m'est venue l'envie de tracer une ligne entre ces deux bornes. / Après tout, tracer une ligne, c'est écrire, c'est dessiner." (Davodeau 2021: 9)

In fact, Davodeau already reflected on traces of humanity in 2011 in the collective graphic novel *Rupestres*, a docufictional, collective graphic travel diary written by six cartoonists who are well-known in the French comic scene (apart from Étienne Davodeau these are David Prudhomme, Emmanuel Guibert, Pascal Rabaté, Marc-Antoine Mathieu et Troub's).⁷ The collective decided to literally get to the bottom of human history in the prehistoric and ornate caves the Vézère valley – often dubbed as the "Valley of Mankind" – and, at the same time, to trace the beginnings of the ninth art.⁸ Although it is a controversial thesis in expert circles of comic science, the six comics artists see in the prehistoric rock paintings the first preforms of art in general and thus also of their art in particular.

As is usual for the genre of graphic reportage, Davodeau uses the method of the graphically reproduced interview. The interviewees are noticeably very different: On the one hand, there are random hiking acquaintances, i.e. people who are on the road like he is, or locals whom he meets on his tour and with whom he gets into conversation. But there are also different experts and anti-nuclear activists. The conversations with the people Davodeau meets seem realistic in the genre of the travelogue and emulate a personal, diary-like account (in fact, the graphic novel notes the dates of the "mammoth hike": Davodeau started on 11 June 2019 and arrives at his destination on 11 July). Yet the interview-like conversations with experts and activists clarify the work's constructive nature and shift the focus from the highly personal account of the extreme physical and mental challenge of the 800-kilometre-long hike through landscapes that have been shaped by humans over thousands of years to the less personal and universal form of investigative graphic journalism or docufictional educational comics. This contrast creates a certain narrative tension, but ultimately reflects the intention to write an involved graphic novel. Thus, the very intimate account of the hike, which pushes Davodeau to his limit several times and lets him experience first-hand the existential importance of water and the effects of heat waves favoured by climate change, supports the impetus for readers to think about sustainability, resources, and waste production. An episode in which the author directly asks readers what they will do with the book in their hands after reading it vividly illustrates the coupling of the author's personal experience with the question of the future of *homo sapiens*. The question of "consumer behaviour" and the sustainable handling of the artefact by buyers and readers is not trivial in view of the material nature of the work, the production of which consumed a lot of wood and water, among other resources. Furthermore, Davodeau directs this question pointedly to the implicit reader with the almost

⁷ For a study of this graphic novel see Hertrampf (2014).

⁸ It is interesting to note that the Vézère valley is also at the centre of one episode in the first volume of *Sapiens*, where Harari looks at the culture of hunter-gatherers and explores the question of animism with the expert Doctor Father Klüg.

dizzying hypothetical question of the significance of books in general and this album in particular for future generations. Compared to the millennia of traces left by humans in the Vézère valley, for example, and those which will be left by the nuclear waste in Bure, Davodeau does not assume that the traces of his drawings will have a particularly lasting effect. The graphic novelist expresses this contrast with a good deal of self-irony: when he has lost his way and is making his way through a field of grain, he comments on this with a double-meaning pun: "Le moment de mon voyage où la trace que je dessine est visible." (Davodeau 2021: 170)

Coming back to the passages with expert interviews, readers see that they reduce the authentic content of the autodiegetic travelogue: For it does seem a little unrealistic when Davodeau meets a specialist from Pech Merle just at the moment when he is thinking about the painters of the first preserved cave paintings (p. 21), and the latter then reports to Davodeau and readers about the knowledge of the early traces of prehistoric ancestors while walking along. This technique, however, does not remain uncommented: In a metalepsis, Davodeau himself refers to this form of graphic poetic licence, in which he productively uses the artifice of telescoping space and time (Davodeau 2021: 27).

In fact, the graphic documentation character is most clearly expressed in the interview episode with the physicist Bernard Laponche, which begins by integrating a sketch on the nuclear repository project in Bure. The interview with Bernard Laponche is very exciting, because he not only participated in the planning and execution of the first French nuclear power plants, but then gradually developed into a determined critic of nuclear energy. Last but not least, he criticised the social dimension, because while the price of nuclear electricity (in France) is comparatively low, the taxpayer becomes responsible for the immense costs of maintaining and building reactors as well as the final storage of nuclear waste. Furthermore, he criticises the irresponsible short-sightedness of the nuclear lobby, which in 2019 launched Cigéo⁹, which will store the most radioactive waste from French nuclear power stations underground, a project that aims to solve the nuclear waste problem according to the motto "out of sight, out of mind".

Starting from the fact that France is one of the world's largest producers of nuclear power and that nuclear energy has recently been labelled as "green" energy by the European Union, the graphic novel presents the French history of nuclear power. Here, too, the combination of personal travelogue and documentary reportage is remarkable. The brief summary of the key dates in the history of nuclear energy in France begins with Davodeau's arrival in Colomey-les-deux-Églises, which was General de Gaulle's retirement home and is site of his grave and the central memorial with the Lorraine Cross, the symbol of the Resistance movement during the Second World War. Indeed, the icon of the Fifth Republic first promoted nuclear energy in France, and in these passages, Davodeau ultimately becomes more political than in the rest of the work. While Charles de Gaulle generally is considered a national mythic figure and, as a *lieu de mémoire* in the sense of Pierre Nora, contributes significantly to the national identity of the Fifth Republic, Davodeau deconstructs Charles de Gaulle's mythic character as a national hero by his cynical proposal to symbolically transform, or even to replace the Lorraine Cross with the radioactive warning sign (see fig. 3).

⁹ Abbreviation for Centre industriel de stockage géologique, that is, "Industrial geological storage centre".

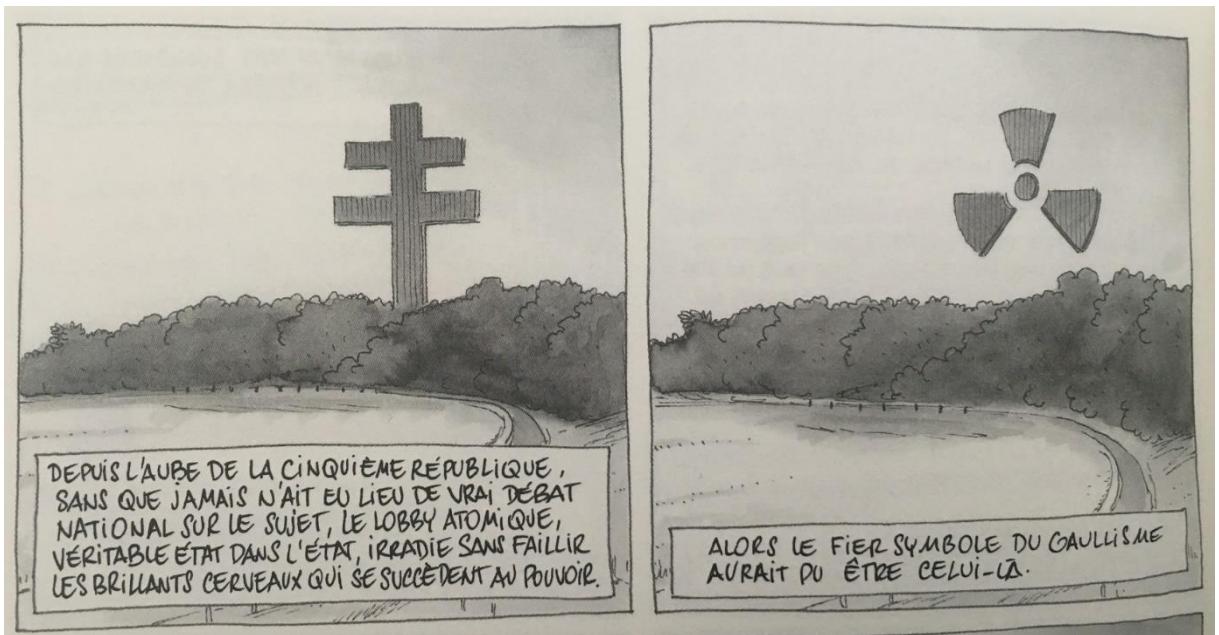


Fig. 3: Davodeau's ironic symbol transfer: from Gaullist myth to nuclear power (extracted panels from Davodeau 2021: 168)

When reaching Bure, Davodeau closes the graphic work with a kind of nature meditation in which space and time are dissolved. The trees above the underground nuclear waste repository swaying in the wind become a symbol of the question of the future of human traces. Finally, the graphic travelogue on land use, climate change, and nuclear waste ends with an impressive zoom out, mirroring the beginning.

In conclusion, Daveaudeau's almost monochrome brownish, sometimes watercolour-like drawing style expresses a thoughtful seriousness and, in contrast to *Sapiens*'s brightly coloured panels and entertaining story board, is clearly aimed at an adult readership with an affinity for graphic narratives. The almost meditative mood evoked by the drawing style creates a parallel on a graphic level to the reflections of a "promeneur solitaire", who, however, far from any romanticised reverie, ponders the very real and nightmarish abysses of human intrusion into creation.

Finally, linking elements of a graphic travelogue narrating the author's individual search for meaning with an ecocritical graphic journalism discussing general ethical questions on the Anthropocene is particularly effective. Directly addressing the reader takes them on a topographical and symbolic journey through space and time and illustrates the urgency of sustainable action without intrusive didacticism or ideological indoctrination. The polyphony created by the numerous interviews enables readers to form their own opinions on the existential issue that concerns all humans. The aesthetic design supports readers' own reflections in that the wordy interview episodes with a high density of information are followed by purely graphic episodes in which the author wanders through the most diverse landscapes. Thus, the alternating dominance between text and image leads to a balance between information and reflection.

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