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Contemporary Graphic Narratives of the End: Sketching an Ecopolitics of Disorientation and Solidarity through *Sf Bande Dessinée*¹

Narrativas gráficas contemporáneas del fin : esbozando una ecopolítica de desorientación y solidaridad a través de la *bande dessinée* de ciencia ficción

Abstract

This article focuses on visions of the end in contemporary science fiction *bande dessinée* to explore the combined potentialities of the sf genre and the comics medium for imaginaries of world-rebuilding in the Anthropocene, and to develop an ecopolitics of disorientation and solidarity for a collapsing world. Bringing an ecocritical approach to queer and feminist theorizations of the politics of disorientation, it first discusses texts that draw (counter-)narratives of Anthropocenic futures, in which other-than-human agencies, spatialities and temporalities take centre stage in unsettling ways and collapse Western master narratives of the environment. In Jérémy Perrodeau's *Crépuscule*, the non-linear storylines of an artificially created and now contaminated planet collide and assemble to disrupt the myth of a 'virgin land', rendering the erasure and slow re-inscription of genocidal and ecocidal violence. In Enki Bilal's trilogy *Coup de sang*, it is the illusory hyper-separation of humans from nature that is dismantled through post-apocalyptic elemental graphics. The article then explores ways in which disorientation becomes fully productive as part of an ecopolitics when it is entwined with solidarity, a term that here extends beyond the human and is understood as a praxis of both care and resistance, drawing on ecofeminism and environmental philosophy. This is explored through Ludovic Debeurme's trilogy *Epiphania*, which critiques and dissolves the human-animal boundary into enmeshed relationalities in sf visions toward multispecies communities and bodily and ethical mutations; and Jeanne Burgart Goutal and Aurore Chapon's *ReSisters*, a choral narrative that makes use of comics' potential for diffractive and participatory readings to draw the outlines of an ecofeminist uprising.

Keywords: ecofeminism, decolonial ecology, elemental ecocriticism, care, resistance

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las visiones del fin en la *bande dessinée* contemporánea de ciencia ficción y examina el potencial de este género de cómic para la creación de imaginarios de reconstrucción en el Antropoceno, a través de una ecopolítica de desorientación y solidaridad en un mundo que se derrumba. Aportando un enfoque ecocrítico a las teorizaciones queer y feministas de la política de la desorientación, primero se analizan textos que dibujan (contra)narrativas de futuros antropocénicos, en los que voluntades, espacialidades y temporalidades distintas a las humanas cobran protagonismo de manera inquietante y colapsan las narrativas maestras occidentales del medio ambiente. En *Crépuscule* de Jérémy Perrodeau, las tramas no lineales de un planeta creado artificialmente y ahora contaminado chocan y se ensamblan para desbaratar el mito de una "tierra virgen", borrando y reinscribiendo lentamente la violencia genocida y ecocida. En la trilogía *Coup de sang* de Enki Bilal, es la ilusoria hiperseparación de los humanos de la naturaleza lo que se desmantela a través de una estética gráfica postapocalíptica de los elementos naturales. A continuación, el artículo explora las formas en que la desorientación se vuelve plenamente

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productiva como parte de una ecopolítica cuando se entrelaza con la solidaridad, un término que aquí se extiende más allá de lo humano para ser entendido como una praxis tanto de cuidado como de resistencia, inspirándose en el ecofeminismo y la filosofía medioambiental. La trilogía *Epiphania* de Ludovic Debeurme disuelve las fronteras entre lo humano y animal para proponer una relacionalidad entre comunidades multiespecie junto con mutaciones corporales y éticas. Por su parte, *ReSisters* de Jeanne Burgart Goutal y Aurore Chapon, es una narración coral que hace uso del potencial de los cómics para ofrecer lecturas difractivas y participativas que dibujen el comienzo de un levantamiento ecofeminista.

Palabras clave: ecofeminismo, ecología decolonial, ecocrítica elemental, cuidado, resistencia

A panel filled entirely with black ink as a vision of the end in/of the Anthropocene: this is one of the recurring images woven through the network of Philippe Squarzoni's 2012 climate change graphic memoir *Saison brune (Climate Changed)*,² among hockey-stick graphs, clocks ticking or spherical forms from the planet to a bomb. In one instance, this black panel echoes the question just posed of whether there is still time, in opening a page featuring drilling rigs and pipelines, images of the "abundant and almost free" energy that "has defined our civilization" (305-306). This is a collective pronoun that Squarzoni is careful throughout to problematize as the 'we' of the Global North, steering clear of universalising narratives of the Anthropocene that emphasise its planetarity while erasing its inequalities. *Saison brune* is a striking text in part for its use of the specificities of the comics medium, notably verbal-visual interactions and multilinearity, to draw eco-anxiety in the face of the overwhelming scale of the climate emergency. In this sense, its network of entirely black panels can be read as a representation of (the impossibility to imagine) the end without humans. Yet this "ungraded blackness" (Chute 98) may also perhaps be understood as thickness rather than void,³ leaving open rather than closing off the future, in a way that echoes Terry Harpold's discussion of his and his students' affective reactions to the text as one opening "the slimmest space in the middle from which to build a path to the edge of an outside of despair" (58). This article focuses on *bandes dessinées* that deploy the speculative – rather *Saison brune's* documentary – mode precisely to sketch (im)possible futures into this void/thickness. Graphic texts can powerfully combine the exploration of the medium's formal possibilities with its aptitude for imagining worlds, as this article will discuss in relation to Enki Bilal's elemental climate change trilogy *Coup de sang (Fit of rage)* (2009-2014); Jérémy Perrodeau's narrative of outer-space exploration/colonisation *Crépuscule* (2017); Ludovic Debeurme's trilogy of becoming-earth other *Epiphania* (2017-2019); and Jeanne Burgart Goutal and Aurore Chapon's ecofeminist fable *ReSisters* (2021).

Key questions guiding this article are thus how and what to draw, script and sketch in a world where the future may seem unthinkable, yet where "only the yearning for sustainable futures can construct a liveable present"; and how to harness the

² 'Woven' is used here in Thierry Groensteen's sense of *tressage* [weaving], when spatially distant images echo each other across a comic (*Système* 25-27).

³ I am here borrowing Hillary Chute's words about the use of solid black in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* that "shows not the scarcity of memory, but rather its thickness, its depth" (98).

ecographic possibilities of comics and ecopolitical potential of creative speculation to “[transpose] energies from the future back into the present” (Braidotti “Posthuman” 206-207). The texts I discuss are sf graphic narratives of world-*rebuilding* that, in differing ways, sketch what Debeurme terms “the imaginaries that have become absolute necessities in the urgency of our world, of a decentring of the human toward a broader whole” (Gaboriaud).⁴ The potentiality of sf for this decentring has long drawn critical attention, as “fiction that refuses to accept the world as it is” and develops “an ethics of becoming that both interrupts and revises power structures” (anthropocentric, patriarchal, (neo-)colonial, capitalist and/or heteronormative) as characterised by Lauren J. Lacey, who focuses on women’s writing that deploys sf as well as other fantastic forms (5). Donna Haraway’s evocative opening of sf – a key inspiration for this article – to “science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far” understands it as “practice and process; it is becoming-with each other in surprising relays; it is a figure for ongoingness in the Cthulucene” (*Staying with the Trouble* 2-3). While discussions of green sf have tended to focus on literature and film, the comics medium offers rich ecographic possibilities for such speculative engagements with the more-than-human world, drawing on narrative and formal aspects such as graphic style, colour, linear and multilinear relations between panels, and text/image interactions for tracing ecological storylines of posthuman futures.⁵ The sf visions such as those I will explore in this article – of strange new worlds, elemental (post-)apocalypse, multispecies pacts and ecofeminist uprising – draw on the combined potentialities of the sf genre and the comics medium for “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*) of the present as “always the future present” (Braidotti “Posthuman” 206), and they, crucially, help us sketch the outlines of what I term an ecopolitics of disorientation and solidarity in and for a collapsing world.

Disorientation

Bilal’s *Coup de sang* and Perrodeau’s *Crépuscule* are narratives of disorientation, for their characters as well as their reader. In a transposition and amplification of ways in which the climate emergency has redefined human-centred space-time coordinates, environments can no longer be mapped out and time seems to shift in scale as characters attempt to find their way on a changing planet. The Anthropocene, as econarratologist Erin James notes, demands renewed conceptualizations of time, space, agency and narration.⁶ My emphasis here is that it both creates and demands disorientation, understood as an experience that is unsettling – defamiliarizing, perhaps uncomfortable, even violent – yet that can also be productive. Disorientation may challenge and disrupt the coordinates of, and thus decentre a material-discursive world that is oriented around

⁴ “Les imaginaires, qui deviennent nécessités absolues dans l’urgence de notre monde, d’un décentrement de l’Humain, vers un ensemble plus large.” All translations from French are my own.

⁵ On ecographics and ecological storylines, see my article “Towards an Ecographics”, in particular 10-11.

⁶ Erin James and Eric Morel have developed the term econarratology to refer to “the paired consideration of material environments and their representations and narrative forms of understanding” (1).

the human, and redirect what (future) we are oriented toward. My understanding of disorientation here draws on its theorization in queer and feminist phenomenology, in particular in the works of Sara Ahmed and Ami Harbin. While neither Ahmed nor Harbin adopt an explicit ecological perspective, they draw on a vocabulary of embodied interactions with surrounding environments that finds echo with a more-than-human conceptualization of disorientation with humans thrown “off center” (Ahmed 41). The figure of the ground as material-discursive, natural-cultural recurs throughout Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*, as that “into which we sink our feet” and that is “not neutral”, trodden upon and lined with hegemonic paths that orientate – in the production of heteronormativity or whiteness, as Ahmed explores; or anthropocentrism – and construct as others those that stray or deviate (160). Moments of disorientation may be violent, in the ways in which they “throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground” (157). Yet “the point is what we do [with them], as well as what [they] can do – whether they can offer us the hope of new directions” (178) toward (more-than-human) liveability and habitability. Harbin echoes these complexities of disorientation as moments that are “most promising when they not only jostle, but also propel” (277). Resonating again with ecological and ecopolitical thought and praxis, Harbin writes of the “particularly anti-dualist qualities” (277) of disorientation as potentially compelling us to “re-establish capacities for embodied, relational selfhood” (270), as subjects enmeshed in communities and environments, in a world where recognition of vulnerability, limited resources and interdependence can direct us to articulate and respond to “calls for more just political action” (271).

This framework provides us with evocative (non)coordinates to explore the experiences of disorientation featured in *Crépuscule* and *Coup de sang*, in speculative futures where environments respond in unsettling and decentring ways to the foundations and directions of master narratives of nature and their material impacts. Perrodeau’s *Crépuscule* tells the non-linear storylines of a planet called Grand Central, whose ecosystem was artificially created. It is now contaminated by an unknown virus, its trees, streams, plants and rocks sprouting and morphing into geometrical structures. This phenomenon is explored by our human and android characters who, in sequences told in orange hues, investigate the disappearance of the scientific team that first observed it. Characters struggle to orientate themselves temporally and spatially across a ground upon which “what happens follows no discernible logic” (56).⁷ As they advance into these strange landscapes, they are small figures lost in panels stretching with the expanse of a contaminated nature, and the comic further draws on the graphic interplay between sequentiality and co-presence to render their disorientation in an environment that disrupts the direction of their path. Their climb down a cliff is broken down into panels on a page that viewed as a whole forms the mountain, the *périchamp* directing the reader’s attention toward the other-than-human spatiality and temporality of the landscape that is all but background (40),⁸ echoing the characters’ later realisation that

⁷ “Ce qui se déroule ici ne suit aucune logique.”

⁸ Benoît Peeters coined the term *périchamp* to refer to the fact that each panel is perceived at the same time as the other panels around it, which constitute its periphery (15).

a mountain is no longer where it should be (48), as if the virus had contaminated and accelerated the movements of deep time. Elsewhere, a wordless strip of three tall panels shows the team walk up and down streams (42), rendering a sense of both advance and stagnation in an environment where, as later noted by one of the androids, distance to their destination decreases without them getting closer (48).

These space-time disruptions culminate in a twelve-page sequence (77-88), the album shifting to a blue palette, after the team reach the epicentre of the disturbance and pass through a violent gravity storm. The reader experiences this along with one of the humans and one of the androids, looking across pages with no clear linear progression, seeing them falling through blackness, their bodies distorted, dismantled, face melting and skull exploding, multiplied in one panel and decomposed across others. This is a portal to a twin planet, or perhaps the same one, where geometrical forms have fully taken over life. Two members of the team, arrived seconds earlier that turned into decades, have settled, dug, cultivated and developed this strange environment “thanks to the exploitation of natural resources” (105),⁹ grafting and creating geometrical plant and animal life. As the android who has been on the planet for decades tells his teammates, they are “the pioneers of a new land/earth” where “everything is to be built” (116).¹⁰

The colonial dimensions of these words are brought to the fore in the entwinement of this survival storyline of lost explorers with the yellow-coloured sequences which with it has alternated throughout, and that are arranged in a non-linear order across the album. The first, which opens the *bande dessinée*, charts the formation of Grand Central, with a sphere releasing geometrical structures that burst and sow, water, feed, and create the planet’s luxuriant ecosystem. The next yellow sequence shows a man native to the planet teaching his son about their responsibility as guardians of this environment located at the intersection of several worlds. It is the cornerstone of a precarious multiverse structure that can collapse at any moment, the consequences of which will not be visible immediately but felt eventually (47), words that echo the “slow violence” of environmental degradation (Nixon). The Indigenous community is later slaughtered by soldiers who have landed from a spaceship, and the now emptied and razed planet can be artificially re-created, in a sequence that reproduces the first page, a *tressage* effect (Groensteen 25-27) that calls upon the reader to return to the beginning of the album as it nears its end. In this sense, *Crépuscule* takes on what Nixon terms the major representational challenge of “how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects” (3). It does so by rendering both the highly visible violence of genocidal and ecocidal acts (the slaughter of the Indigenous community and the razing of the planet’s ecosystem) and the “temporal dispersion of slow violence” (Nixon 3). Its non-linear narrative structure of differently coloured and entwined temporalities makes visible long-term consequences, not only in shifting back and forth in time, but also through the spaces between panels and pages, which, as argued by Groensteen, are “central to the operative logic of comics as a system

⁹ “grâce à l’exploitation des ressources naturelles”.

¹⁰ “les pionniers d’une nouvelle terre” [the French word ‘terre’ can mean both land and earth]; “tout est à construire.”

that communicates meaning” (*The System* viii). Gutters and margins are both elliptical and filled with meaning for the reader, as a productively disorienting visual inscription through blankness of a violence that is invisible to the human.

In its alternating storylines, *Crépuscule* thus roots the sf trope of disruptions in the space-time continuum in the violence of genocide and ecocide, rendering both its erasure from the (scientific) creation myth of Grand Central and its re-inscription on its ecosystem. Echoing the colonial and gendered dimensions of the ideological construction of a ‘virgin land’, the process is described in *récitatifs* early in the comic as extermination for penetration: “through annihilation, the land was sterilised so as to facilitate the implantation of a new ecosystem” (25).¹¹ From then on, the scientific team rarely interfered with the ecosystem as “its evolution, while accelerated, should be as natural as possible” (25).¹² Interactions with nature shift from invasion to observation as if from a perspective that would be transcendent, not relational or enmeshed, not oriented or directed – what Haraway has critiqued as objective knowledge (“Situated Knowledge”) and Stacy Alaimo as “perspectiveless perspective” (*Exposed* loc. 1816). This is a large-scale experiment across multiple planets, and one that, as we have seen, goes wrong, the environment responding in disorienting ways to its destructive creation. The album’s last two blue-tinged double pages show the geometrical forms spreading to meteorites, whose rocky irregularities sprout the cylindrical or rectangular shapes into which they will eventually morph. The geometrical forms that have taken over the album’s panels and pages are both clearly human-technologically-made, and evading their control as they proliferate, both turned part of the fabric of the drawn environment and still at odds with its irregular and lively outlines. A symptom of contamination, they also resonate beyond the album with the disorienting experience of seeing the shapes of human-produced waste proliferate in environments imagined to be far removed or preserved from human actions, such as the deep sea.

Crépuscule’s characters, human and android, lost scientists and pioneers of a new world, remain unaware of or blind to the yellow-coloured storyline to which the reader has access, and do not formulate an ethical questioning of Operation Grand Central. It is, rather, the reader who is not only jostled but also propelled by a productively disorienting experience to combine and collide the album’s non-linear storylines in a decolonial re-visionary reading. In the end, the reader is left to reflect on what new world the Anthropocene may mean back on Earth – one rooted in genocide and ecocide erased from its creation myth, as in the album’s cyclical opening and ending, heading (back) toward collapse, thrown upside down by a slow violence that cannot be controlled; one saved by technicist solutions, where humans and androids together create natural-artificial animal and plant life. Or it may be a new world starting with productive disorientation, where master narratives collapse upon themselves, one reoriented toward decolonial sustainability in dialogues with Indigenous epistemologies that do not fall into a neo-imperialist anthropocentric/biocentric binary (see notably Cilano and

¹¹ “Par annihilation, on stérilisait le terrain, afin de faciliter l’implantation d’un nouvel écosystème.” *Récitatif* is the French term for narrative voice-over in comics.

¹² “L’évolution, bien qu’accéléérée, se devait d’être la plus naturelle possible.”

DeLoughrey). It may be a new land/earth to *re-build* with humans off centre, always already enmeshed with a ground that is neither neutral nor ever still under our feet.

And it is to the Anthropocene Earth that *Coup de sang* returns us, one that, the prologue states, is “totally disoriented, devastated, broken” by a nature that “spat out its anger” (7).¹³ Human perception is defamiliarized from the start of the first volume, opening with a page zooming out of a dolphin’s eye with *récitatifs* in which the man with whom it has temporarily merged (the former child subject of scientific experiments in hybridity) talks of experiencing through and with the animal’s senses that are now entangled with his (9). This high-technological vision of animal futurity recalls those that have long populated sf (see in particular Vint), and indeed Bilal’s own exploration of the posthuman hybridity of the “mecanhumanimal” (as in the title of his 2013 exhibition). If the animal-human boundary is eroded to the point of embodied dissolution from the *bande dessinée*’s opening, it is more broadly the illusory “hyper-separation” (Plumwood, *Feminism*) of humans from nature, in which the latter is constructed as background and resource for the stories and needs of the former, that *Coup de sang* will disrupt through its evocative imaginaries-imageries of other-than-human agencies. Commonly referred to as Bilal’s ‘trilogy of the elements’, with the absence of fire due to the post-apocalyptic focus on a world re-building itself (with little to no input from humans, as we shall see), the series follows a different group of climate refugees in each volume, eventually bringing them together in the last. The elementality of this graphic narrative is strikingly rendered through monochromatic colour schemes, with the first volume set in polar landscapes and awash with the grey-blue hues of water; the second with the ochre tones of earth dominating its scenes of a desert drenched in oil; and the airy conclusion, where the blues of gradually brighter skies open to a full “Technicolor” (248) world as the three groups come together, rebooted on and by a planet transformed.

Coup de sang, importantly, complexifies the cultural trope of a “monstrous nature” that its opening words of wrath and violent disorientation may have pointed toward, and that, as Stacy Alaimo has analysed, posits humans as “the endangered species” (“Discomforting Creatures” 279) in an anxiety-ridden exploration of the monstrous consequences of the collapse of the nature/culture divide. The trilogy’s imaginary-speculative recognition of other-than-human agency is articulated in terms that are anthropomorphic, to be sure, but strategically so, “allied with the elements” (Cohen and Duckert loc. 279). The wrath directed at humans is here not contained in monstrous animal creatures – animals are, after all, much too porously enmeshed with humans, and in fact are just as disoriented by this environmental fit of rage – but elemental forces that are multiple, distributed, shifting, everywhere. This is an agency from which the human characters cannot distance themselves or take shelter, and with which they cannot not interact. The texture of the world is morphing, causing extreme disruption in the perception of space, which alters the propagation of sound for instance, impacting all human senses. Characters fail to orientate themselves across unstable and changing environments with impossible earthly cartographies: the Alps are seen in a North Pole

¹³ “totalement désorientée, dévastée, morcelée” ; “a craché sa colère.”

that may itself be under a Southern hemisphere sky, and the ground of the Gobi Desert sways with the movements of perhaps the Baltic Sea. The environment is, more so even than shifting from background to foreground, *overwhelming*. Volume two is particularly “lively”, to use Stephanie LeMenager’s evocative phrase about the “visceral knowledge” elicited by literary renditions of petro-scapes (131), the hotel in which the characters have taken refuge drenched with sticky and smelly oil that is no longer underground, as the earth bark is lifting and ripping itself open. The division between nature and culture explodes also through an erratic material-discursive intertextuality, when words imperceptibly float or swirl and are breathed in and out by humans as if possessed or ventriloquised: in volume two, characters act out *Romeo and Juliet* with no knowledge of the play; in volume three, twin girls temporarily acquire encyclopaedic knowledge of culture and history when the Zeppelin on which they are travelling goes through natural-digital clouds.

Creatively transposing and amplifying the embodied experience of the elementality of the world into disorientation, the *bande dessinée* resonates with the idea in elemental ecocriticism that “elemental agency engenders perspective tumble, an unstable shift between familiar, domestic frames (the elements are the substance of the inhabited world) and the disorientations of a wildness that may be distant or within (the elements are climatic as well as corporeal and diegetic forces)” (Cohen and Duckert loc. 411). Elemental agency is evoked through text, as characters reflect on the disorienting visceral experience of “ceaselessly productive” matter (Cohen and Duckert loc. 99). It is also, of course, strikingly visual, rendered through Bilal’s well-known painterly graphics. Panels tend to stretch in size, drawing the reader in the density of water, earth, air, in the vibrant materiality and narrativity of an environment that is in the process of self-sculpting, melting, de- and re-composing, the comic engaging with thick elementality through layered and textured ecographics.

This elemental agency is one that characters struggle to understand, and the recurring idea of *not* trying to understand what is happening is taken to extremes in the final volume. As the fit of rage begins to make sense for the reader – transformed but clearly captioned maps reappear – the human characters start to feel their memories and selfhood being erased as they are being re-programmed so that they are ready to enter a pact of association with a planet that has cleaned itself up of pollution. It is, indeed, the planet itself that initiated the trilogy’s titular fit of rage, a complex and revolutionary phenomenon aiming to rewrite the “laws of living together outside of the current economic, financial and geopolitical schema it has deemed inoperative, obsolete and suicidal”, as the trilogy’s epilogue explains (285).¹⁴ The comic ends with seemingly gleeful scenes of humans ‘associating’, and the closing splash page zooms out to reveal a now square planet. This sf trilogy concludes playfully, with a solution to the climate emergency that strips humans of their own agency on a planet that proposes or imposes to them a contract to which they may or may not have agreed. The ending, which is too ludicrous to

¹⁴ “lois de vie commune, hors des schémas économiques, financiers, géopolitiques en cours, jugés par elle inopérants, obsolètes et suicidaires.”

be really utopian, mocks the hubris of an Anthropos who sees himself as both harbinger and saviour of the environment. It is also a darkly humorous reversal of a criticism addressed to Michel Serres's vision for a natural contract of "symbiosis and reciprocity" (38) to which the environment could not possibly agree *if* we do not hear that "the Earth speaks to us in terms of forces, bonds, and interactions" (39), if we direct ourselves by human-centred coordinates on the straight and narrow path of exceptionalism. The trilogy's premise and conclusion are, in Bilal's own words, absurd to be sure (Bry). Yet it is no more so than hyper-separation from the elements out of which we never are, whose forces and vibrancy are palpable, and increasingly overwhelmingly so, and to which humans can no longer afford not to re-attune our limited senses.

The hallucinatory elemental graphics of *Coup de sang* bring a speculative imaginary to Ahmed's words that in moments of disorientation "the hand might reach out and find nothing, and might grasp instead the indeterminacy of air. The body in losing its support might then be lost, undone, thrown" (157). What if it were not nothing to grasp the indeterminacy of air; how much more lost, undone, thrown might the body be by this speculative recognition, and what may she do with it? In what direction, toward what future(s), may disorientation propel us, in jostling us off-centre on a changing planet of entanglements and exclusions, where the slow violence of colonial histories and presents is inscribed in the fabric of the earth, and our becoming is enmeshed with other-than-human agencies, temporalities, spatialities? I would argue that it is when it entwines with a praxis of more-than-human solidarity that disorientation, a process that disrupts, dissolves, dismantles human-centred coordinates, becomes fully productive as ecopolitics.

Solidarity

Solidarity is a key term in Val Plumwood's environmental philosophy, whereby "an appropriate ethic of environmental activism is not that of identity or unity (or its reversal in difference) but that of solidarity – standing with the other in a supportive relationship in the political sense" (*Environmental Culture* 22). This, as Chaone Mallory explores, raises the question of whether the language of solidarity, and "'traditional' political concepts, categories, and values [...] that is, the languages through which we articulate the political, [can] be applied to the more-than-human world" (4). The two key points I wish to make for the understanding of solidarity I develop here are, first, to propose to root it in disorientation, in recognising that terms such as solidarity need precisely to be decentred, redirected around the unsettling recognition of other-than-human agencies; and, second, that a solidarity that stems from such disorientation can be productively conceptualized and deployed as a praxis of both care and resistance. Care can be a contentious notion, one that Sherilyn MacGregor points out can "narrow our understanding of women as political actors" (58). Yet the care envisaged here is not limiting or a hindrance to a political ecofeminism. Rather, it is combative, radical care – *disruptive*, such as that theorized by María Puig de la Bellacasa, in the affirmation that care matters "despite and because of its ambivalent significance" (2). It is part of a process

of ongoingness, in “attentive practices of thought, love, rage, and care” (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 55-56), of making kin and *resisting* with and as kin. Resistance is understood here as shared beyond the human “with the environment, the landscape, and all their eco-social bodies”, as developed in Serenella Iovino’s eco-cartography of Italy as text and land (5). This opens to liberatory practices of writing and reading more-than-human stories etched into and by the land (echoing the hallucinatory elemental agencies of *Coup de sang*, or the re-inscription of violence upon the ecosystem in *Crépuscule*), and stories for other futures on a habitable and just planet. To bring out care’s potential as and for resistance, the combativity of care and the caring of combativeness, it is useful here finally to evoke Martin Crowley’s concept of “antagonistic alliances”, which foregrounds that the Anthropocene is an era of conflict, war even, that demands resistance from “weird solidarities” (202).¹⁵ That solidarity as a praxis of more-than-human care and resistance is indeed weird, difficult toprehend, *disorienting* is a given. It thus requires a “speculative ethics” (Puig de la Bellacasa), which is where sf – science fiction, speculative feminism, so far (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 3) – is productive to transpose, amplify, think through, try out, and as per my focus here on graphic sf, *sketch* the outlines of an (im)possible “future present” (Braidotti “Posthuman” 206).

Debeurme’s *Epiphania* is such a story of care and/as resistance, in the practice and process of, as the author explains, family-making beyond the human (Gaboriaud). The Epiphania are beings that begin as human-nonhuman animal hybrids and later morph into other types of life forms that are eventually unrecognisable. Across the trilogy, they are engaged in a process that echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s “Becoming-Animal,” which is in fact quoted at the beginning of the trilogy. As I will return to below, this is a transformation that can be thought of as becoming-“earth other”, to use Plumwood’s evocative term that recognises “in the myriad forms of nature other beings” (*Feminism* 137). The trilogy opens with natural catastrophes and meteorites that plant animal-human babies into the land where they crash around the world, and follows Kojika, who is adopted by the young widower in whose garden he arrived. Volume one sees Koji as a child navigate the complexities of living in a human society as an Epiphania, and of understanding his own transformation as an adolescent, as his body changes (he grows horns) and he rebels against his father as a parental and human figure. In volume two, he leaves his father to join a group of Epiphania who have escaped from the scientific-military facility where they were detained and grew up, and becomes part of an activist network. The last volume sees the planet disrupted again by the arrival of, first, semi-giants and giants composed of natural materials (referred to as Organics, Lithos and Metalics [sic]) that wage war on human societies. They are then joined by gigantic beings of earth, wind, fire and air (Elements) with whom Koji and other Epiphania, who have by this stage themselves transformed into animal-human-environmental giants, eventually make a pact. In its exploration of animal-human hybridity, *Epiphania* is reminiscent of sf graphic visions such as Jeff Lemire’s DC series *Sweet Tooth* (2009-2021), in the initial

¹⁵ Crowley borrows this term from Karen Gregory, who imagines weird solidarities at work in contemporary data alliances.

focus on a child protagonist and humans' military-scientific experimentation on the hybrids; and Charles Burns's *Black Hole* (1995-2005), in its imageries-imaginaries of teenage bodily transformations through an animal lens. It also clearly echoes with *Coup de sang*, yet crucially its sf elements of animal-human hybridity, a wrathful and monstrous nature, other-than-human agencies, and a pact are deployed with a focus not on disoriented humans, but on the disorienting Epiphania.

The trilogy seems, at first, to be tightly focused on the human-animal boundary and exploring both its porosity and harmful materialisations. Through the treatment of Epiphania by humans, the *bande dessinée* makes an explicit link between speciesism and the animalisation as dehumanisation and marginalisation of certain human communities: the outfits of the "anti-mixbodies" militia are strikingly similar to the KKK's, and the camps in which Epiphania are imprisoned are reminiscent of human detention facilities. Importantly, *Epiphania* goes beyond a metaphorical use of animals to tell a human story, offering instead an intersectional exploration of entanglements *and* exclusions in a world where non-human animals are both constructed as figures of alterity and enmeshed with human (animal) existence. The Epiphania, who are hypervisible in society and media, in fact expose the very invisibilisation of their animal kin as resources for human needs, as the activist group that Koji joins attacks slaughterhouses and laboratories, spaces where, as Sherryl Vint points out, human dependence on animal products is hidden away (1). After standing with animals against human others and rising against speciesist structures, the Epiphania later become part of multispecies communities as a refuge from the war waged by the Giants. A panel in volume three shows an Epiphania – human body with horns and pointy ears – with a snake around his arm, a bird on his shoulder, insects on his legs and a cat and a bear next to him, the *récitatif* telling that "we had crossed the barriers that usually separate beings from each other" (loc. 66),¹⁶ in a community of care composed of all those seeking asylum, animals, Epiphania and humans.

Yet this first vision of the possibility of cohabitation is short-lived, destroyed by the army of a humankind that is still at war with the Giants. This nascent utopia will fully develop when the boundary between the human and their (animal) Other, which volumes one and two critique and dissolve, is in the third more explicitly located as part of a broader understanding of the living. This enmeshment of human-animal relations within the world that they inhabit was foreshadowed in volume one, in scenes where news reports about the Epiphania were followed "sans transition" [without transition] (loc. 90) by reports on an "autre titre" [other headline] such as the environmental catastrophe of an oil tanker sinking or radioactive waste (loc. 102). Here, the comic's grid aesthetics, with square panels stuck to each other without visible interframe spaces, render both hyper-separation and entanglement, in the division into separate panels of the Epiphania (human-animal) question and environmental matters, which are simultaneously entwined as part of what Debeurme calls the page-entity (Gaboriaud). It is from the chapter in volume three entitled "Pact" that the frames of panels – that, as the author puts it, both limit perception and gesture toward what lies beyond them (Gaboriaud) – give

¹⁶ "On avait franchi les barrières qui habituellement séparent les uns des autres."

way to a looser, freer layout, just as the war ends and humans (are made to) recognise and live with the limits of nature.

The Epiphania have by this stage transformed after touching one of the meteorites that had crashed in the deep sea, morphing beyond (un)familiar animal-human hybridity toward becoming at once animal, human, elemental, natural. The Epiphania's becoming-earth other lies not in the finite result of their literal transformation, but in the process of, to draw on Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal plateau, which as mentioned above is quoted at the opening of the trilogy, their "organism [entering] into composition with *something else*" (274), with the animal, human, environmental. These are not "fixed terms through which that becoming passes" (238) but worldly elements ceaselessly changing in their relation to each other. As boundaries dissolve, the *mise en page* opens along with utopian visions of a pact agreed between Giants and Epiphania to end a war that was not about the end of the world, but the end of a world (loc. 111). Pages show humans small in lively environments of mountainous, watery, or woody Giants, a perspective that gives them a sense of the scale of the world (loc. 119). New multispecies communities take form, ones where modernity is not discarded, but everything reconsidered in relation to the limits suggested by nature (loc. 118). In the end, *Epiphania* is not (only) an sf story that explores and critiques the material-discursive construction of animality as alterity. It is a graphic narrative of becoming-earth other and family- and community-making beyond the human, bodies *and* ethics mutating (Braidotti *Transpositions* 274) toward a speculative future in which solidarity, as a praxis of care and resistance, comes to mean that "nothing [can] be done against nature itself anymore" (vol. 3, loc. 118).¹⁷

Epiphania, like *Crépuscule* and *Coup de sang*, offers spectacular visions of the end of the, or a world. There is nothing of the sort in *ReSisters*, which is set in a world slowly collapsing in the near future of 2030 that the reader is likely to identify as both resembling and amplifying her own present of environmental degradation, capitalism with shades of green-washing, and entrenched inequalities. The *bande dessinée* is a choral narrative of multiple voices and perspectives. The characters are introduced to an ecofeminist community named ReSisters, first through mysterious notes that Pierre, an executive at an organic food corporation, finds at his workplace and that were anonymously left by Sandy, a cleaner in the company. The notes are signed with a bee symbol and feature various unattributed quotations (but attributed in the comic's appendix) that gesture toward the breadth of ecofeminist influences and thought, for instance Ursula Le Guin, whose writings deploy sf as subversion to bend and break binaries; decolonial environmentalist thinker, activist and physicist Vandana Shiva, who advocates for earth democracy built on justice, sustainability and peace; or Fatima Ouassak, whose pirate ecology reclaims the mother as a revolutionary subject and popular urban spaces as ecopolitical sites. Pierre's friend Lila investigates the notes, decodes its coordinates, and that night finds herself transported to the ReSisters community, where she learns about their experimentations with various ideas, rituals

¹⁷ "Rien ne [peut] être à nouveau fait contre la nature elle-même."

and actions to build other ways of living. Ecofeminism is here both theoretical and grassroots-activist, and its radical ecological solidarities are at once decolonial, queer, crip, anti-capitalist, multispecies. It is built on care, reclaimed as combative and disruptive in particular by the character of Sandy from its gendered and economic marginalisation, which is rendered through the wordplay ‘pre-care’/*précaire*, the French word for precarious (Chapter 3). It is a praxis of sororal resistance (as encapsulated in the community’s name) from the bottom-up against neo-colonial patriarchal capitalism, in individual, community and organised ways, the ReSisters forming also a counter-army (Chapter 10). Moreover, the comic draws (on) ecofeminism as an international movement that is, crucially, planetary rather than global in Gayatri Spivak’s sense, across a “differentiated political space” (290) of “planetary creatures rather than global agents” (292). A fresco that retraces its history (Chapter 10) is not a universalising narrative of a Global North female Anthropos, but a complex chronology of simultaneity and advances, parallelisms and exchanges across India, Kenya, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, Argentina, the United States or France, and whose origins in the 1970s are not European (Françoise d’Eaubonne comes second), but the Indian Chipko movement.

ReSisters is striking in terms of its form both for the amount of text it features at times (some pages draw on the tradition of illustrated books with blocks of texts supplemented or complemented with images), and the profound irregularity of its *mise en page*. This resonates – formally, narratively, politically – with the idea of reweaving the world, the title of the seminal 1990 ecofeminist text edited by Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein that features prominently in the comic (it is read avidly by one of the characters).¹⁸ The amount of text in some places serves to render that reweaving the world is a praxis that requires thought, action, dialogue and experimentation. Text-heavy passages delve into the complex diversity of ecofeminism, as well as its theoretical-activist dimensions. Lila’s character for instance has many questions about the practical functioning of the ReSisters community, the detailed answers to which can be summarised with her interlocutor’s words that “everyone contributes in the way that they can: that’s what solidarity is” (Chapter 7).¹⁹ Blocks of text relate in open ways to images that they do not anchor with fixed meanings, such as when a page telling of the premises and promises of the ReSisters community as a transformative space faces a wordless visual sequence of Lila listening attentively to the other-than-human agencies of an animal-plant-soil ecosystem (Chapter 7). Images of elements of the garden tend toward abstraction as they are heard anew, prefiguring the ritual later in the comic of holding a Council of All Beings, which this time draws heavily on text to articulate a radical ecofeminist politics where environmental rights are integral to democracy (Chapter 8).

The text-heavy spreads and their supplementary/complementary images render processes of explaining, nuancing, contextualising, exchanging verbally, trying out and

¹⁸ I employ (re)weaving here taking inspiration but also departing from Groensteen’s seminal and strictly formalist concept of *tressage*/weaving, to attend to comics’ aesthetic, narrative and political potential for ecofeminist readings. I develop this in my forthcoming chapter “Graphic Entanglements”.

¹⁹ “Chaque personne contribue comme elle peut : c’est ça, la solidarité.”

sketching the outlines of revolutionary living. These combine in productive ways in the reading experience with the more ‘classically’-comics spreads, where extreme variation in layout deploys both the codes and the flexibility of the page architecture as part and parcel of an eco(graphic)feminist practice and project. There is, for instance, a page where colourful unframed panels that stretch to the bleed line, in which Lila talks of identities not fitting into gendered or racialised boxes, contrast with the thickly-drawn borders of the stark black and white panels below that recount experiences of racism (Chapter 2); or a confrontation on the horizontal axis of the page of the narratives, laid out in vertical strips, of imperialist global green capitalism on the left, and of a planetary decolonial praxis situated in India on the right (Chapter 12). There are the two “anti-gravity” spreads that represent ecofeminism as a theoretical-activist movement composed of and through sorority/solidarity, post-colonial thought, radical feminism, deep ecology, ecosexuality, or sharing care work, visualised first as the various rooms of a house that takes up a full double page. On the next spread, they are divided into panels that do not form a linear progression but are each connected to all the others, as noted by Lila in her *récitatif* in the bottom right corner of the page, thus explicitly demanding multilinear reading (Chapter 7).

In the creative ways in which it draws ecofeminism across its panels and pages as both “theoretical constellation and activist inspiration” (Sandilands 223), *ReSisters* is a text that calls upon the reader to engage in a diffractive reading of “various insights through one another to produce something new, new patterns of thinking-being” (Karen Barad cited in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 58). As such, it is also a strikingly participatory comic, making full use of the medium’s potential for involving its reader in the (re-)making of its graphic network. This becomes explicit on one page with a space left blank for the reader to write or draw what she can and wants to do to ecofeminise her life (Chapter 10), working with the limitations and possibilities of her own situated perspective to affirm her “response-ability” (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 12). At the end of the book, the figure of the reader is not just addressed but materialises. At this stage Lila and her friends have returned to the ReSisters community to find that it has disappeared, leaving behind it the premises and promises of an ecofeminist revolution to be made. The reader appears, disoriented, holding the comic as a manifesto-amulet through which, she is told, she can connect to this “intimate place of power and hope” and contribute to “building a part of the world with us” (Chapter 12).²⁰ *ReSisters* deploys the speculative mode for world-(re)building, in ways that both differ from and resonate with the other *bandes dessinées* I have discussed in this article. Like *Epiphania*, it offers fantastic visions of present-future solidarities as care and resistance. Crucially, these are words-actions whose revolutionary potential *as ecofeminist* the *bande dessinée* draws out and etches (back) into the ecographic-ecopolitical praxis of reweaving the world through new patterns of thinking-doing, thinking-becoming-with.

Conclusion

²⁰ “lieu intime de puissance et d’espoir” ; “construire un bout de monde avec nous.”

“Catastrophic for the human imaginary” (Colebrook 51), and leading to some catastrophist and immobilising imaginaries of the end, global climate change is also something with which artists cannot not engage. Graphic narratives, in their perceived accessibility and the potential complexity of their storytelling and aesthetic architectures, as well as their shifting place in popular culture, bring an interesting and still under-examined angle to debates in the environmental humanities around narrative, which has been variously decried as all-too-human or hailed as essential (see James 183-184). *Crépuscule*, *Coup de sang*, *Epiphania* and *ReSisters* show some of the ways in which sf graphic narrative specifically, in deploying the ecographic possibilities of comics and ecopolitical potential of creative speculation for liveable future presents, may be productively disorienting, propelling us to envision more-than-human solidarities in and for the Anthropocene. This article has thus examined the entwined potentialities of the sf genre and the comics medium for disanthropocentric imaginaries and imageries and for ecological storylines of world re-building. We have seen non-linearity rendering the erasure and slow re-inscription of genocidal and ecocidal violence; textured watery, earthy and airy graphics evoking overwhelming elemental agencies; hyper-separated binaries dissolving into enmeshed relationalities in the (un-)framing of bodily and ethical mutations; and an ecofeminist use of multilinearity and text-image interactions for diffractive and participatory readings.

These different yet resonating contemporary graphic narratives of the/an end have helped us in drawing the outlines of an ecopolitics in and for a collapsing world, with disorientation and solidarity at its core. The dismantling of master narratives, and the unsettling recognition of other-than-human agencies, spatialities and temporalities that throw humans off centre, open toward a praxis of combative care and more-than-human resistance against the material-discursive structures of neo-colonial patriarchal speciesist capitalism. The violent disorientations of living in the Anthropocene need reorient us – a collective pronoun shot through with entanglements and exclusions, to be reconfigured in planetary terms – away from universalising, hubristic visions and amnesiac histories, toward a praxis of more-than-human solidarity on and for a changing planet. As Braidotti writes, “the future as an active object of desire propels us forth and we can draw from it the strength and motivation to be active in the here and now” (“Posthumanism” 206). Graphic sf texts such as *Crépuscule*, *Coup de sang*, *Epiphania* and *ReSisters* evoke some of the ways in which we can draw from our speculative futures the earthly imaginaries through which to script and sketch now the outlines of sustainability as ecopolitical becoming-(with)-earth others.

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