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Popular Terroir: Bande Dessinée as Pastoral Ecocriticism?

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Popular Terroir: Bande Dessinée as Pastoral Ecocriticism?

Abstract

This article analyses a corpus of French comic books (including series and one-shots) published since 2010 that share a thematic focus on agriculture. I argue that this mini-explosion in French comics publishing that crosses various generic and reading public boundaries can be viewed as a contemporary iteration of the pastoral. This ever-expanding body of texts is guided by ecocritical preoccupations, through their engagement with *terroir*. Because of the cultural connotations of *terroir* in modern and contemporary France, these comics are situated at the intersection of environmentally progressive and culturally conservative discourses.

Keywords

Pastoral, terroir, bande dessinée, France, environmentalism, ecocriticism, agriculture, viticulture

Popular *Terroir*: *Bande Dessinée* as Pastoral Ecocriticism?

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The primary corpus treated by this essay is made up of thirty-some French *bandes dessinées* ‘comic books’ primarily published since 2010.¹ This body of texts derives its coherence from a thematic preoccupation: French (and sometimes global) agriculture. There are of course a variety of focal points within this broad theme—agribusiness vs. environmentalism, the interface between gastronomy and artisanal agricultural practices—but, unsurprisingly, oenology and viticulture play a prominent role, and indeed, dominate these stories. It may be too soon to make many absolute and definitive statements about a contemporary publishing trend, and certainly this body of work will need to be continually revisited as it expands and responds to our evolving environment. It is nonetheless clear that there has been a noticeable uptick in agriculturally-themed *bandes dessinées* (*BD*) in France since 2010. Emmanuel Macron’s aggressive positioning of France as an alternative safe haven for climate scientists faced with hostility in the form of defunding of research, cuts, and censorship to the Environmental Protection Agency and National Parks Service, as well as widespread climate change denialism in the Trump-era United States can only be likely to favor further production of environmentalist artistic narratives and encourage pro-environmentalist, if business-friendly, politics in the Hexagon.

I hazard to make an intervention *in medias res* due to the urgency of the contemporary environmental crisis. Writing about the representations and cultural uses of endangered and extinct species, Ursula Heise has posited that

however much individual environmentalists may be motivated by a selfless devotion to the well-being of nonhuman species, however much individual conservation scientists may be driven by an eagerness to expand our knowledge and understanding of the species with whom we co-inhabit the planet, their engagements with these species gain sociocultural traction to the extent that they become part of the stories that human communities tell about themselves: stories about their origins, their development, their identity, and their future horizons. (5)

The implication of Heise’s observation is that humanistic, cultural, and historical critiques of various forms of artistic or literary representations have the potential to inform strategies of activism by identifying what types of representation gain traction. Therefore, early scholarly intervention in the form of analysis of emerging artistic movements is worthwhile, even if the staying power of its hypotheses is

potentially limited by the unpredictability of actuality. I have neither the expertise nor the presumption to translate my own observations into a course of political action, but I believe that an important part of the engaged work of the contemporary cultural critic and educator is to take the first step of observing and opening dialogue about phenomena that may otherwise appear to have been the product of a spontaneous cultural combustion.²

In this article, I will show that these *bandes dessinées* can reasonably be viewed as a contemporary extension of the historical literary form, the pastoral, because they carry over some of the fundamental characteristics of this form—indeed, they may be best situated within a subcategory of pastoral called the georgic. These texts tend to celebrate the natural world, often through beautiful drawings or paintings that exceed mere settings for human drama. But even in their “prettiness,” such texts can take an environmentalist stance, both because of the deployment of specific narrative techniques and because of the importance of the notion of *terroir* in French culture. *Terroir* evokes the combination of unique environmental factors (soil types, farming practices, microclimate, etc.) that give an agricultural product its character. This notion is deeply connected to national mythologies about artisanal agriculture and therefore participates in what Heise characterizes as “the larger narratives that enable individuals’ efforts to resonate with larger social networks” (5). The interest in *terroir* represented in *bande dessinée* thus seems simultaneously to be a symptom of an increased environmental consciousness in France and an indication that French environmentalism has managed to impose itself on the mainstream by playing into non-progressive, nationalist narratives.

If we consider these *BD* to represent a form of contemporary pastoral, *terroir* is what gives a French twist to this iteration of the genre. As historian Venus Bivar has shown in her very recent book, *Organic Resistance*, national mythologies about artisanal agriculture in France have completely occluded the realities of the successful push to industrialize the agricultural sector in the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, the environmentalism found across these *bandes dessinées* is currently either more memorializing or more aspirational than it is actual, reflecting ideals about what French agriculture was prior to the nineteenth century or what it should be currently, rather than representative of the majority of food production in the country. Nonetheless, this mini-explosion of French comics about agriculture can be read as an index for a set of cultural historical problems connected to the intersection of early twenty-first-century environmentalist concerns, affirmations of French national and regional identities, and exceptional cultural production in the face of globalization. This ever-expanding body of texts appears, then, to be functioning as a new form of pastoral literature, one guided by ecocritical preoccupations but anchored in problematic mythologies of French culture.

I would like to evoke briefly what the pastoral is and has been in order to better show how the *bandes dessinées* of this corpus can clearly be seen to constitute a contemporary articulation of this genre. In his book *Pastoral*, Terry Gifford examines three strands of the pastoral throughout literary history. The first of these strands is the historical form which originated in poetry but subsequently appeared in drama and, most recently, novels. This use of “pastoral” derives from antiquity, meaning poems “about life in the country, and about the life of the shepherd in particular” (1). Gifford’s second use of pastoral pertains to content, meaning “any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban” (1). A third use of pastoral is critical of the unreflective celebration of nature characteristic of the second type—pastoral is in this sense often a pejorative or dismissive term that resists the simplistic idealization or complacency that willfully ignores the absence of laborers in representations of a cultivated rural landscape (2). One sub-generic type of pastoral that does not ignore labor is of course the georgic—although it certainly may idealize or simplistically represent such labor. The georgic might seem to be a more immediately obvious generic classification against which to measure these *bandes dessinées* since, as Timothy Sweet points out in *American Georgics*, the georgic is specifically concerned with the natural world as a site for labor as opposed to leisure.³ Parsing between the two is not as important here as it would be for someone like Sweet, who is engaged with the ideological valences of agrarianism versus pastoralism in early American literature and political philosophy.

There are certain characteristics of the historical pastoral form that persist in contemporary French agricultural *bandes dessinées*, which is one reason I would suggest we view the texts that make up this mini-publishing bubble as a contemporary extension of pastoral literature. Obviously, the presence of a vintner, a peasant, or other agricultural worker of some sort can be thought of as the analogue to the classical pastoral shepherd or the farm of the early American georgic. Narrative movements of “retreat and return” are also frequently present.⁴ The retreat to the countryside in the *BD* is frequently a return to the countryside, particularly by a prodigal child returning to the rural “*domaine*” ‘estate,’ often upon the death of a patriarch. The patriarch often metaphorically haunts the narrative as the protagonist works to impose his or her own signature onto the family’s wine, working to tease out of the *terroir* something lost to a previous generation, to revive a varietal, or capture an aroma. Corbeyran and Espé’s *Châteaux Bordeaux* (‘Bordeaux Castles’) series, for instance, opens with the heroine, Alexandra, getting off of a plane from the United States, where she had been working, and going straight to her father’s funeral, at and after which she confronts her brothers and their desire to sell the *domaine* rather than to take it over. In the process of this type of narrative, the prodigal comes to peace with family history, surmounts obstacles, and at least achieves the hope (if not realization) of commercial success.⁵

The trope of “return,” as Gifford acknowledges, can also be a sort of moral or philosophical payoff—understanding gained by the protagonist through their retreat into nature. The manifestation of this type of return in the contemporary pastoral *BD* is often more mundane, such as the financial return gained or hoped for by Alex in *Châteaux Bordeaux*. But a less tangible return may be gained by coming to terms with family history. Florian, protagonist of Fabien Rodhain and Luca Malisan’s *Les Seigneurs de la terre* (‘The Lords of the Earth’) series, abandons his work as a high-powered lawyer in Lyon for a retreat to the land to work as an organic farmer in his native village, simultaneously breaking off a previous wedding engagement in order to marry a local girl. Florian’s retreat/return becomes a quest leading him beyond the deep French countryside to India, where he eventually discovers the mother who had abandoned him as a child, now living as a militant member of Vandana Shiva’s environmentalist, anti-GMO movement.⁶ The third volume of the *Seigneurs* series concludes by giving the impression that the traumas with which Florian has struggled may be resolved, so there is hope for him as an individual, a father, and a son, but the promising family reconciliation is embedded in the political hope represented by Shiva’s militants. This future-looking payoff is to a degree consistent with what Lawrence Buell suggests about Thoreau’s retreat, which is not a form of “willed amnesia” but rather a self-conscious appeal to an alternative set of values over and against the dominant one (*Environmental Imagination* 49-50)—and thus, is a political gesture. Florian’s retreat/return to the land and embrace of organic farming sets him deliberately at odds with his materialistic ex-fiancée while progressively reconciling him with his origins, thus aligning him with the memory of his patrimony as well as rediscovering his mother in her current *altermondialiste* ‘alter-globalization’ activism.

Fred Bernard’s *Chroniques de la vigne: conversations avec mon grand-père* (‘Chronicles of the Vine: Conversations with my Grandfather’) takes a similar tack in a non-fictional mode. Bernard’s retreat to the country chronicles memories of his conversations with his grandfather, a Burgundian vintner—conversations that encompass winemaking, their family story, and major historical events. The memory work undertaken by Bernard interweaves or overlays personal history onto landscape as evidenced in the myriad panels of Fred and his grandfather walking the fields on the cover and within the *Chroniques* (see figure 1). The beautiful fields, shown throughout the seasons, furnish the primary setting for the discussions and lessons that the grandfather conveys to Fred and, in turn, to the reader. Familial or political events enter initially through written text but then often segue into a series of panels illustrating those events, as in the chapter “Occupation des sols,” ‘Occupation of the soil.’ In this chapter Fred introduces larger panels of him and his grandfather walking the fields—the men take up varying positions and relative sizes in the panels—then smaller panels that include the text “Mon grand-père

conserve des souvenirs totalement antagonistes et irréparables de la guerre” ‘My grand-father holds totally antagonistic and irreparable memories of the war.’ Bernard thus interlaces familial and national histories of the same natural landscapes.

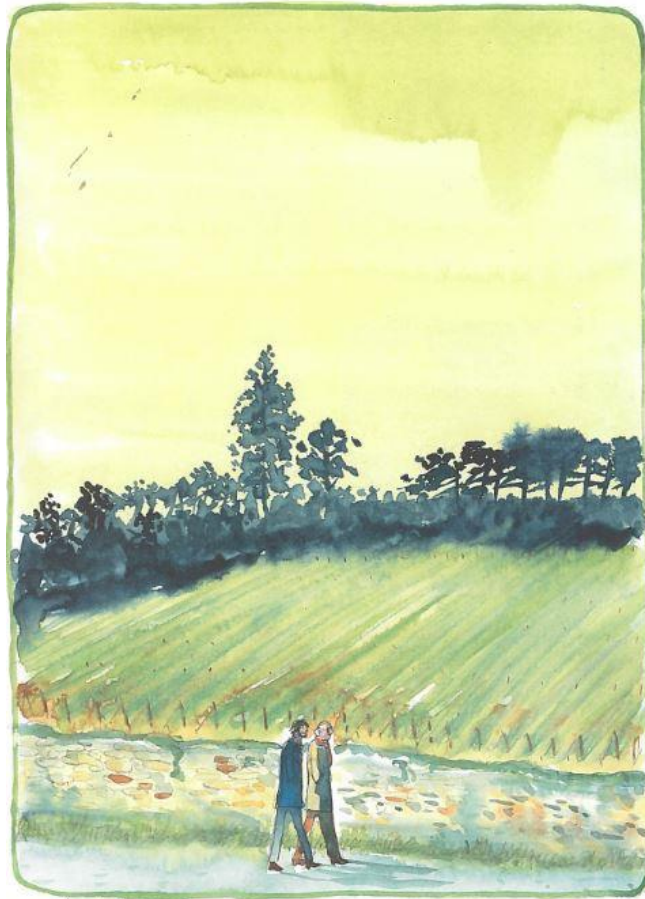


Figure 1: Fred Bernard. *Chroniques de la vigne*, “À l’ombre des jeunes vignes en fleurs.”
The protagonist, Fred, and his grandfather walking in the fields.

The inclusion of memorabilia in Bernard’s work emphasizes the lineage and familial history tied up with the family’s viticultural occupation and, moreover, recalls the prevalence of nostalgia in classical pastoral. Indeed, Bernard mobilizes a common aesthetic strategy of the documentary comic by including representations of various objects either in his hand-drawn reproduction or, making a representational shift, as photographs. These objects include things like a photograph of an early twentieth-century watercolor still life with a wine bottle by the “mère de mon grand-père” ‘mother of my grandfather,’ the wine menu from a

New Year's Eve dinner decorated with a drawing by his grandmother, and snapshots of family members in the fields or at tables. *Chroniques de la vigne* was so successful and well-received that Bernard was commissioned to create a follow up: *Chroniques de la fruitière: Voyage au pays du Comté* ('Chronicles of the Dairy: Journey into the Land of Comté'), dedicated to artisanal *Comté* cheese-making.⁷ Bernard interweaves recollections of the conversations with his grandfather into this exploration of a completely different region (Franche-Comté) and product. The types of meandering exchanges that Bernard has with vintners and cheesemakers echo in many ways the exchanges between *bédéiste* 'comic artist' Étienne Davodeau and biodynamic winemaker Richard Leroy in Davodeau's 2011 *Les Ignorants: récit d'une initiation croisée* (*The Initiates: A Comic Artist and a Wine Artisan Exchange Jobs*). The "return" here is a mutual exchange of savoir-faire. The success of *The Initiates* and Davodeau's 2001 book *Rural!* certainly played a key role in demonstrating that there was both critical recognition and a potential market to be had for agriculturally/rurally themed comics. In *Les Ignorants*, Davodeau chronicles Leroy's intimate relationship with his vines. In the opening sequence of the book, Richard is teaching Étienne how to prune the vines in winter (see figure 2). Both men are seen in the same panel, from the rear: as Étienne prunes, Richard urinates in the field. Richard's action prompts Étienne to comment "Tu pisses dans tes vignes? Bravo" (11) 'You piss on your vines? Bravo.'



Figure 2: Étienne Davodeau. *Les Ignorants*, p. 11. Richard urinates on his vines.

Nonplussed, Richard replies "C'est comme ça qu'elles me reconnaissent" (11) 'That's how they recognize me.' From the outset, Richard represents himself as the physical intimate of his vines, scoffing at the suggestion that his urination is a lack of respect, but rather implying a type of relationship not unlike the marking of physical territory or the practice of mutual grooming and thus mutual scent marking engaged in by some animals. In the next panels, Richard returns to work, whistling or humming, and then concernedly remarks to an individual plant "Hé bin mon

pépère? / T'as plus grand-chose à nous dire, toi, hein... / Si tu nous donnes une out deux dernières grappes cette année, ça sera bien" (11) 'Well, gramps? / You don't have much left in you, do you . . . / If you give us one or two final clusters of grapes this year, that would be good.' Where Bernard more whimsically accords nature speech, Davodeau, via Leroy, models a relationship that treats the natural world with respect by speaking to it affectionately, requesting its help rather than demanding it.

Among *bandes dessinées* that are culinarily or gastronomically-oriented narratives, the celebrity chef Yves Camdeborde, author and main character of the Jacques Ferrandez-drawn *Frères de terroir* ('Brothers in Terroir'), brings the reader on various journeys to commune with his rural suppliers. This retreat to nature is thus that of both chef and the reader who connects with these gastro-cultural roots. The return is that of financial and professional success for the chef and heightened gastronomical pleasures for all (this type of book may include recipes), further reinforced by the moral righteousness of knowing that one is now eating the best quality of product. In this sense, the *bande dessinée* proffers pleasures that play into what Venus Bivar characterizes as the contemporary success of certain agricultural ideas thanks to national(ist) nostalgia: "A growing nostalgia for rural life and an appreciation for the ill effects of industrial agriculture on the natural world likewise led to a greater interest on the part of urban consumers in products that boasted organic or terroir designations" (10). Through the possibility of identification with the return in first person rural narratives like those of Bernard and Davodeau and the gastronomical pleasures mobilized by Ferrandez and Camdeborde, a heavily urban and often left-leaning bourgeois readership can strengthen their memory ties to the nation's agrarian, non-industrialist past. The *BD*'s discourse on *terroir* serves this connection and facilitates a critique of global capitalism and neo-liberal economics, yet the typical reader still enjoys the benefits of these economies thanks to the relatively high salaries that allow them to afford organic produce and their choice of wines. Indeed, the celebration of the French countryside through beautiful representations within the *bande dessinée* figures as an extension of the text's prosthetic pleasure in nature to their readers.

We can find a celebration of nature in the highly aestheticized quality of many of these texts. In Davodeau's *Les Ignorants*, one of the vintners observes that "Il n'y a pas de grand terroir viticole qui ne soit pas un bel endroit. Je le pense très sérieusement" (255) 'There is no great winemaking *terroir* that isn't a beautiful place. I really truly think that.' Above all, in these texts one finds sumptuous landscapes that often fill large-scale panels. In the most industrial of the *BD* in this corpus, the crime and family melodrama series, these are often classic establishing panels or intermediary panels that illustrate the setting of the story's action. Nature here—and it is typically cultivated nature—is beautiful, even idealized, but it functions as mere backdrop for human dramas. *Le Sang de la vigne* ('The Blood of

the Vine’) series, for instance, is much like American or British TV series *Murder She Wrote* or *Grantchester* where the protagonist-investigator is not a police detective or P.I. but merely a private citizen. One wonders: how is it possible that no one is disturbed by how many dead bodies turn up when oenologist Benjamin Cooker comes around?⁸

Even in texts that are driven by melodrama, crime, and commercial competition, such as the *Châteaux Bordeaux* series, one frequently finds interludes where characters “commune” with nature in lush illustration, such as a scene early in the first volume where Alex walks through the vineyards with her hands trailing along the plants. In this sequence, one panel in a three-panel row shows her entire body, while the next panel, a short horizontal that stretches across the full page, features a close-up of Alex’s graceful hand. The following panels show Alex tasting a grape; again, close-ups emphasize the haptic, as two small panels show the hand and mouth in closer and closer framing. The taste triggers a flashback shown in the next series of sepia-toned panels to when Alex was a child and tasted grapes in the same field. Alex’s physical beauty here is intertwined with that of the beauty of the land, just as her history and memory is intertwined with the history and memory of the land. Corbeyran and Espé here feature an intimacy between humans and nature that is perhaps more highly aestheticized (Alex’s pulchritude is clearly meant to sell the series, as it is featured on every cover), but is no less substantive than that of the intimacy between Richard Leroy and his vines as depicted by Davodeau (see figure 3).

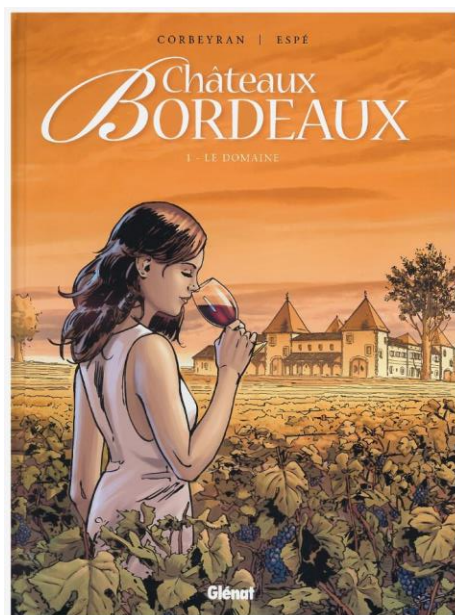


Figure 3: Cover image, Corbeyran & Espé. *Châteaux Bordeaux: 1. Le Domaine*.

In Bernard's *Chroniques de la fruitière*, landscapes alternate with detailed drawings of nature that are pure visual delights (see figure 4). One such series of four pages is entitled "Comté fleurette," a play on the region's name, "crème fleurette" 'light cream,' and "fleur" 'flower.' These double-pages are made up of close-ups of wildflowers, labeled by name and ornamented with humorous and/or informative commentary by various insects, with an inset of a cow, and a miniature human. A passing bee asks, "Que feriez-vous sans moi? Rien!" 'What would you do without me? Nothing!' while the tiny human wonders aloud if a certain plant was one used in a particular childhood game. These gently confrontational insects and animals demonstrate how the pastoral can become ecocritical. The way that Bernard gives parts of the natural work a voice with which to speak back to the reader, while humorous, also serves to put the human in their place vis-à-vis the land and opens the way to ecocritical readings, just as does the importance given to *terroir* within this corpus.

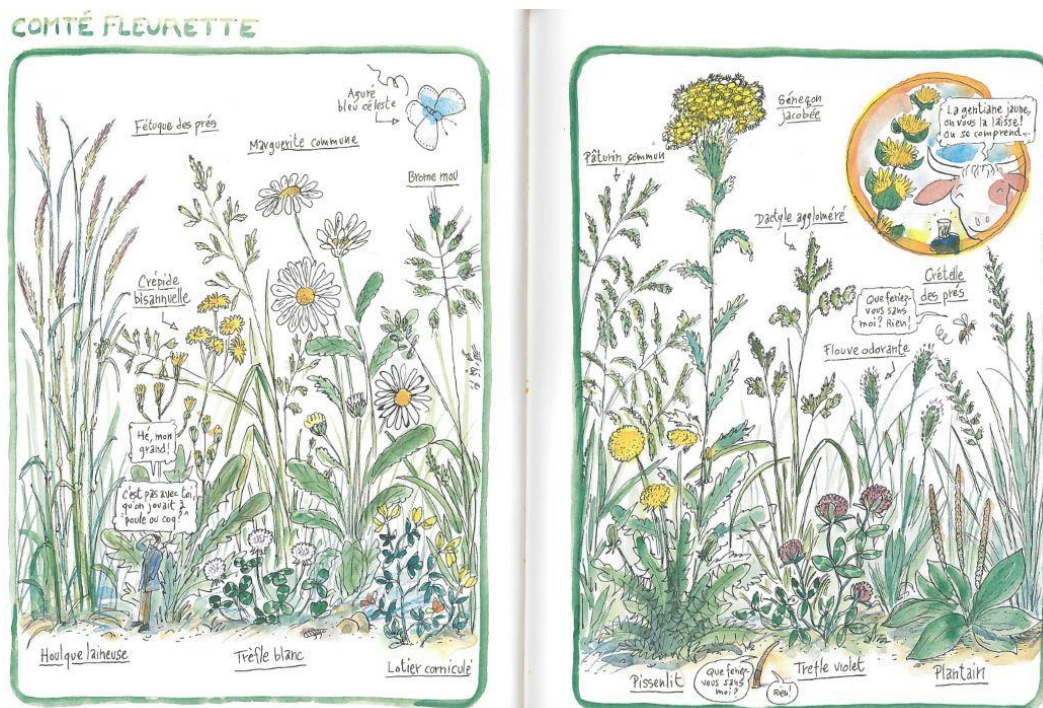


Figure 4: Fred Bernard. *Chroniques de la fruitière*. "Comté fleurette."

While the discussion here is limited to *bande dessinée*, it is worth mentioning that the proliferation of agriculturally-focused narratives in French comics parallels, with a very slight delay, a similar proliferation of ruralist

documentary and fiction filmmaking, which is but one indication that these *bande dessinée* are part of broader cultural phenomena. *Terroir* is a particularly potent notion in winemaking as it is the conceptual basis for the *appellation d'origine contrôlée*, or *A.O.C.*—a designation that essentially determines wine's commercial possibilities. A state-regulated notion of *terroir* first entered French law in 1411, when King Charles VI gave rights to the aging of Roquefort cheese to the village of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon. The *Parlement de Toulouse* subsequently determined that fines would be imposed upon sellers of imitation Roquefort.⁹ The legal designation of *A.O.C.* was exclusively devoted to wine over the course of the twentieth century until 1990, when the purview of the governing body of *A.O.C.s*, the *Institut National d'Appellations d'Origine*, was extended beyond wines to other agricultural products. Today, *A.O.C.* labels figure prominently on qualifying cheeses and butters, for example. Beyond a legal definition and set of regulatory standards, *terroir* comes into significant play in discussions of artisanal cheese production, as well as many other artisanal foodstuffs such as chocolate or honey.¹⁰

Terroir's true believers maintain that *terroir* can be tasted, a quality that Manu Guillot and Hervé Richez represent visually by riotous and whimsical images emanating from a coveted but mysterious bottle in each of their volumes of *Un grand Bourgogne oublié* ('A Long-Lost Great Burgundy').¹¹ In the first appearance of this technique, the protagonist is minimized to the bottom quarter of a full-page panel, while the top is occupied by a floating cornucopia haloed by a stylized sun, spilling out fruits, grains, birds, butterflies, flowers, and even two horn-blowing *putti*, (1: 13, see figure 5). These explosions of *terroir* are visually demarcated not only because of their suddenly whimsical style, but because each long-lost wine is represented in color in volumes that are otherwise completely black and white (see figure 6.)



Figure 5: Guillot, Richez, and Guilloteau. *Un grand Bourgogne oublié*, p. 13. Visualizing *terroir*: the protagonist, Manu's, first sip of the "grand Bourgogne oublié."



Figure 6: Guillot, Richez, and Guilloteau. *Un grand Bourgogne oublié*, p.45. Visualizing terroir: discussions between specialists debating the qualities of the “grand Bourgogne oublié” as they taste it to try to help the protagonist identify it.

Because *terroir* can be tasted, it plays an important role in the cultural value the French ascribe to both refined gastronomy and artisanal agriculture, but also in national ideals about agricultural production. Not all of the books in this corpus are dedicated specifically to *terroir*, but it is impossible to discuss agricultural production in France without the idea of *terroir* being to some degree present. The importance of *terroir* cannot be overstated in the sense that it is situated at a crossroads of cultural beliefs, agricultural practices, environmental values, and commerce. This is also the confluence of notions at play in the *bandes dessinées* studied here: national and regional/local identity, environmentalism, artisanal practice. There are, of course, clear parallels here between artisanal agriculture and comics art, some of which are made explicit in the more reflexive of the texts. Moreover, *terroir*, as the plot premises and title of *Un grand Bourgogne oublié* imply, is figured as a form of memory: memory of the land that made the wine, but also of the vintner as a type of *auteur*. The *Châteaux Bordeaux* series also mobilizes this trope of memory, as when Alexandra chooses the wine from an un-labeled bottle she first found as a child in the cellars of a ruin on her family’s *domaine*, and then re-finds as an adult, to embody the characteristics she hopes to capture in her own, new wine.

The types of environmental memory mobilized or represented, above all through *terroir*, in these texts could be sorted according to which of Buell’s types of environmental memory they correspond. Buell concludes the abstract to his essay “Uses and Abuses of Environmental Memory” with a question: “To what extent, might memory—as variously defined—serve as a recuperative resource for reenvisioning nature in an era of environmental crisis?” (95). In this article, Buell suggests four different modes or scales by which environmental memory operates: biogeological, personal, social or collective, and national. French agricultural and

viticultural *bande dessinée* generate a national memory through the mobilization of historical pastoral form as well as the nourishment of a national agricultural mythology. In turn, that memory can be leveraged ecocritically, either by the text itself or by scholarly readings.

Three of Buell's four scales of memory predominate in the *BD* of this corpus:

(2) individual *lifelines* imagined as shaped through symbiotic relation to place; (3) narratives of *communities* and (4) of *nations* imagined as formatively shaped by social or collective processes of remembering crucial interdependencies between people and physical environments. (97)

Indeed, the consumption and discussion of the qualities of a wine or a cheese are frequently used to evoke the memory either of a landscape or of a vintner's "hand" across this corpus. The national remains essentially unspoken, haunting each text with the suggestion that the presence and valuation of *terroir* is importantly French.

Significantly, what Buell considers the biogeological ("human life imagined as participating in an ongoing process of planetary unfolding ever since time began," 97) is nearly completely absent. There are few if any explicit connections made to planetary time scale in these works. When a planetary scale is evoked, it is far more often in terms of geographical interconnectedness vis-à-vis contemporary globalized capitalism (the most strident of examples are, unsurprisingly, found in Le Galli and Mike's *La Guerre des O.G.M.* ['The War of the G.M.O.s']) and not a temporal continuum involved in memory work, such as Buell's biogeological. One of the few examples of biogeological time is found in the first chapter of *Chroniques de la fruitière*. Fred Bernard transports his own character to the Jura mountains via a rather mysterious, massive, stainless-steel column that resembles either a rocket with no flames or a larger-than-human milk can with a door. Once arrived, Fred will start his research on Comté cheese in order to write the *bande dessinée*. He lands in a field, and in the panel of his arrival, we see only his feet in a close-up panel of grass and a small lizard, as he declares: "À nous quatre, Ain, Doubs, Jura!!!" 'It's you and me now, Ain, Doubs, Jura!!!,' addressing the three French departments that make up the home of Comté cheese production. The next panel shows a much more distant framing of Bernard from the back, as he contemplates a prehistoric mountain landscape of quasi-tropical vegetation and multiple species of dinosaurs. "Ah. Problème . . ." Bernard's character declares, "150 millions d'années trop tôt!" 'Uh-oh. Problem . . . 150 million years too soon!' Bernard is clearly evoking a biogeological time scale, and indeed the planetary aspect is underlined as the first page's full-page panel shows the green planet with the caption "Un soir, sur Terre..." 'One evening, on Earth...'

before jumping to Bernard and his editor meeting in a Parisian restaurant to discuss the commission for a follow-up to *Chroniques de la vigne*, but focused on cheese.

However, Bernard just as quickly folds planetary time into a much more localized time scale, anchored in both French cultural history and his personal narrative as deployed in *Chroniques de la vigne*. First, Fred begins to imagine a page-long discussion with his deceased grandfather, who tells him how lucky he is to get the chance to do this project because it does indeed play to his interests, as the editor has just said, “Le comté, c’est pas de la saloperie industrielle. C’est un fromage artisanal, fabriqué à la main, en fruitière, affiné en cave . . . Ça te parle, non?” ‘Comté isn’t industrial crap. It’s an artisanal cheese, handmade in the *fruitière*, ripened in cellars . . . That’s your thing, isn’t it?’ Moreover, Fred’s direct address to the land is a play on the iconic proclamation of Honoré de Balzac’s socially climbing character Eugène de Rastignac, as he looks down at Paris from the heights of Père Lachaise at the end of *Le Père Goriot* (1835), “À nous deux, maintenant!” ‘It’s just us, now!’ Here there are four, not two, players to the implied game. Also, Bernard has gone from the Parisian restaurant, where at the beginning of the chapter he met with his editor, to the rural provinces (retreating or returning as is typical of the pastoral, discussed above), rather than having “*monté*” ‘risen’ to Paris from the provinces, as Rastignac did. Bernard is therefore anchoring his project intertextually with canonical French literature, but puts a twist on the literature of French modernity as exemplified by the Paris-centric urban narrative that will come to be so famous in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus, through the evocation of Bernard’s personal history and through French literary patrimony, we see how recourse to individual, family, and collective memories subtend the agricultural *bande dessinée*. *Terroir* functions, therefore, as an element of French national-agricultural memory and identity but also as a means of opening texts to ecocritical reading and is thus often the carrier of environmentalist engagement.

Obviously, this pastorally defined corpus cuts through a very wide swath of generic hybrids and comics audiences, united by the pastoral characteristics that I have highlighted. One can find militant *reportage* ‘journalism,’ documentary, satire, family melodrama, *policier* ‘crime narratives,’ culinary comics such as illustrated cookbooks made in collaboration with celebrity chefs, autobiographical graphic novels, etc. The eclecticism of the corpus shows this pastoral tendency, with its investment in *terroir*, to be spread across various types of comics production of the Franco-Belgian tradition, indicative of the degree to which the tendency is a broadly shared part of French (or coextensively, perhaps, European Francophone) cultural imaginary. It also bears mentioning that the majority of these texts are published by the number two and three Franco-Belgian comics publishing houses: Glénat (both directly and through their imprint, Vents d’Ouest) and Delcourt. The historic artistic avant-garde house Futuropolis, now owned by French

literary titan Gallimard, is also represented.¹² Interestingly, while bookstores frequently have thematic groupings reflecting the agricultural focus of these texts, neither Gléant nor Delcourt currently advertise wine or agriculture as a thematic trajectory on their websites.¹³ I have also initially come across some of these books being sold in Parisian wine shops or upscale *épiceries*. This targeted local marketing on the part of retailers, as well as celebrity prefaces by photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand, environmentalist Pierre Rabhi, and oenologist Michel Rolland, seems to indicate that these books are reaching towards a public that is not the typical *bande dessinée* readership.¹⁴ Compare this more open, general readership with the specialized, serious *bande dessinée* fans of Corbeyran's "industrial" series, and it becomes apparent that almost any configuration of *bande dessinée* readership is touched by the contemporary popularity of this theme. The sheer heterogeneity of the corpus and its probable readership is something crucial to recognize, as it demonstrates the degree to which there appears to be a crystallization of a broadly felt environmental sensitization, with *terroir* as lingua franca.

In France, *terroir* makes strange political bedfellows. Critics often accuse ruralist narratives of a suspect nostalgia for fantasizing about a return to a prelapsarian, all-white, French society.¹⁵ But when it comes to *terroir*, leftist progressive environmentalism and agricultural traditionalists meet, and the political stakes become a struggle between pro-industrial, libertarian, free-market, "modernist" capitalism and a kind of "thinking globally, acting locally" *altermondialisation* anchored in leftist protectionist, French exception politics. We can see this critical viewpoint in Benoist Simmat and Philippe Bercovici's satirical series (plot-wise these are stand-alone volumes). In *Les Caves du CAC 40: les dix commandements du vin* ('The Cellars of the CAC 40: Wine's 10 Commandments') and their *La Romanée Contée* ('The Story of Romanée'), Simmat and Bercovici expose the way that CEOs of French luxury conglomerates have decided that wine is a good business for them to get into in terms of branding, even if they have no knowledge whatsoever of the product.¹⁶ Apparently Bernard Arnault, CEO of LVMH, does not even drink wine, but as his character cavalierly remarks in *Les Caves du CAC 40*, "Pas besoin de boire pour être un grand vigneron. Hé hé hé" (57) 'No need to drink to be a great vintner. Ha ha ha.' Like many French narratives critical of capitalism, Simmat and Bercovici's indulges in anti-Americanism by taking on Robert Parker, the American wine critic whose 100-point rating system in the *Wine Advocate* was responsible for significantly skewing French winemaking towards various types of chemical manipulations and what many feel is a flattening out of taste and devaluing of *terroir*.¹⁷ Simmat and Bercovici's Parker is an alcoholic blow-hard, found guilty of the seven mortal sins refigured as "heady sins" ("capiteux" instead of "capitiaux") or crimes against wine. At the end of the book, the narrative is revealed to be a bad dream of Parker's while under general

anesthesia during cardiac bypass surgery, but the authors nonetheless inoculate themselves from possible slander charges by back matter presented by the phrases “Tous les détails biographiques de cette ‘BD-vino’ sur Robert Parker sont issus des deux essais existant sur le personnage, l’un en français l’autre en anglais (voir bibliographie), ou de l’enquête journalistique des auteurs” (62) ‘All of the biographical details of this ‘*BD-vino*’ on Robert Parker come from the two essays dedicated to the personage, one in French, the other in English (see the bibliography), or from the author’s investigative journalism.’ The scathing satire of Simmat and Bercovici’s work is thus anchored in the disrespect of *terroir* on the part of French CEOs on the one hand and the American wine critic on the other.

These agricultural *bandes dessinées* are works that are arguably themselves ecocritical in the first degree, but even if they are not, they are certainly very open to being approached from this scholarly angle. They indubitably correspond to what Buell characterizes as “environmentally-oriented,” and it is in this sense that they become ecocritical even in spite of themselves.¹⁸ If ecocriticism can be said to be an activity that engages in the study of the interactions between the natural environment and various artistic fields, then the explicitly politically engaged texts *Les Seigneurs de la terre*, *La Guerre des OGM*, and the Simmat and Bercovici satires arguably fit, because they have an explicitly critical, and in the first two cases, environmentalist, discourse embedded within the narratives.

However, across this pastoral corpus where the pastoral cuts across hybridization with other genres and many styles and registers, I would like to suggest that it is the presence of *terroir* as a trope, an idea, and a fact of French agricultural life that gives the critic leverage towards proposing an ecocritical reading of the text. The way the narrative positions itself vis-à-vis *terroir* is an index of the text’s awareness of the stakes of its own discourse. The most hard-core proponents of *terroir* also tend to be engaged in organic or biodynamic growing practices most easily accomplished on an artisanal level. Documenting any type of artisanal production will almost inevitably highlight labor issues. Thus, an otherwise apolitical family melodrama narrative can easily venture into a subplot about feuding neighbors, because *terroir* can be specific to the row of vines, and with small parcels there is high risk of contamination by what one grower calls a tool and another calls a pollutant. More complicatedly, since *terroir* is a form of environmental memory that embodies such a powerful element of national mythology, it has its own blind spots—indeed some call those most ardent proponents of *terroir* “*terroiristes*” (conflating “terrorist” and “*terroir*”), accusing them of a snobbism that is not class-based, but rather anchored in arcane knowledge.¹⁹ Perhaps the most glaring blind spot from an environmentalist point of view is that *terroir* is unavoidably about cultivation, and thus about nature having the function of pleurably feeding humans. Hence, not every comic, even those that discuss *terroir* explicitly and extensively, will be equally environmentally

sensitive—indeed, they may not have any environmentalist engagement at all beyond perhaps an implicit one. Nonetheless, insofar as an artist like Bernard gives literal voice to nature in the form of non-human animals, and characters like Richard Leroy speak to and on behalf of nature, *terroir* does open a breach in which environmental(ist) consciousness and national mythology can cohabit.

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Notes

1. “*Bande dessinée*,” or “*BD*,” is the French-language term for comic books, while a “*bédéiste*” is a comics artist. Like the Japanese terms “manga” and “mangaka,” these are not simply translations of the English “comics,” “comic books,” and “comics artist,” or “graphic novels” and “graphic novelist,” but instead refer to a specific cultural context and publishing tradition. They are frequently used in comics scholarship to avoid confusing American comics/graphic novel debates with the Franco-Belgian textual object. Translations of titles (with the exception of Davodeau’s *The Initiates*) and all dialogue in this article are my own.
2. It bears mention here that ecocriticism is gaining ground in French and Francophone studies, but *bande dessinée* has not yet had a significant place in this scholarship. See for example Boudreau and Sullivan; Finch-Race and Weber; Posthumus, *French Écocritique*; and Posthumus and Finch-Race.
3. See Timothy Sweet’s introduction to his *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in American Literature, 1580-1864* for a synthetic genealogy of the pastoral and the georgic, including its iterations in American pastoralist or agrarian ideologies.

4. Gifford explains: “For the reader or audience, this literary device involved some form of retreat [to the countryside] and return [from it], the fundamental pastoral movement, either within the text or in the sense that the pastoral retreat ‘returned’ some insights relevant to the urban audience” (1-2).
5. This is almost exactly the same narrative structure of Cédric Klapisch’s 2017 film *Ce qui nous lie/Back to Burgundy*, down to the sibling conflict.
6. Vandana Shiva is an Indian writer and environmental activist. This real-life character appears both in the fiction series *Les Seigneurs de la terre* and the documentary *La Guerre des OGM*.
7. “Fruitière” is the term used in French mountainous regions (and also Switzerland) for “fromagerie,” or cheese-dairy.
8. *Le Sang de la Vigne* was adapted from a series of popular *policier* novels by Jean-Pierre Alaux and Noël Balen. From 2011-2017, there was also an eponymous television adaptation starring Pierre Arditi.
9. “Roquefort was undoubtedly popular in France as early as 1411, when King Charles VI gave rights to the aging of Roquefort to the single village of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon (Aveyron). This ruling was upheld by the Parlement de Toulouse, in which merchants selling imitation Roquefort would be fined” (Verdellet 626).
10. We should note that the idea of *terroir* is not exclusive to France, but certainly France is a place where the nexus of legal engagements and cultural values such as leading the European Union in the rejection of genetically-modified crops or arguing for or implementing other environmentalist protectionist policies, as well as the size and importance of the *bande dessinée* market, make for something of a perfect storm. The absence of a broadly held cultural concept such as *terroir* in the U.S., for a counter example, means that while scholarly interest in ecocritical literature is widespread in Americanist/Anglophone critical theory, the French case offers a significant specificity that has not figured into this discussion, a different lens to see how culture and environment interact in artistic and literary production.
11. Some *terroir* believers and biodynamic producers are so firm in their principles that they have chosen to exit the *AOC* because of what they feel to be perversions of the concept.
12. Accordingly, the artists involved run the gamut from Corbeyran (a popular scriptwriter possibly best known to Anglophone comics fans for his work on the

Assassin's Creed series), Jacques Ferrandez (a Pied-Noir complete artist and sometimes illustrator known for his graphic novels that somewhat controversially explore the French colonial past), and Étienne Davodeau (darling complete artist of what could be called the “art documentary” *BD*).

13. Slumberland, the store at the Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée in Brussels, for instance, consistently has a shelf of gastronomical comics. The fact that only two of these books have been translated—Christophe Blain’s *In the Kitchen with Alain Passard*, and Davodeau’s *The Initiates*—also seems in keeping with the Frenchness of the books’ preoccupations.

14. Arthus-Bertrand and Rabhi for volumes of the *Frères de terroir*, and Rolland for the volume of *Châteaux Bordeaux* in which he appears as a character. Michel Rolland appears as a character in one of these more “industrial” fictional series, and he is associated with a highly commercialized type of wine production that heavily targets an international market and produces for short-term consumption more than for aging, and thus a type criticized by many more artisanal producers. The documentary books of Étienne Davodeau and Fred Bernard feature much smaller producers and also appear with smaller publishing houses, so there is a way in which tensions about French wine production are reflected in the types of *bandes dessinées* that represent them. However, since Davodeau, for instance, has also published a rurally themed book with an introduction by French agricultural activist José Bové with Delcourt, this is not a simple or consistent opposition.

15. Venus Bivar’s fascinating study *Organic Resistance: The Struggle over Industrial Farming in Postwar France* traces the history of these political crisscrosses, including exploring the origins of French organic farming in Vichy France’s discourse of racial purity.

16. “Ce que tu perdras dans un premier temps en marge par rapport d’autres produits du luxe, tu vas le récupérer en image” (CAC 40 9) ‘The losses you’ll initially take on margin compared to other luxury products, you’ll make up for in [benefit to] the company’s image.’ The CAC 40 is a French benchmark-stock market index, essentially the equivalent of the Dow Jones Industrial Index, but it is used here the way an American might evoke the Fortune 500, to indicate powerful corporations and their wealthy CEOs.

17. Parker and his influence on French oenology are explored in great detail in Jonathan Nossitor’s documentary *Mondovino*. The film, which was part of the official Cannes competition in 2004, was released in a 135-minute theatrical version and additionally in France as a 10-part television series. It is even evoked

by Denis Saverot, editor in chief of *La Revue du vin de France* ‘The Review of French Wine,’ in the preface to *Robert Parker: les sept péchés capitaux* ‘Robert Parker: The Seven Heady Sins.’ Since the series is satirical and Bercovici’s style caricatural, images of most foreigners play on racist characteristics, walking a thin line between subverting and reproducing stereotypes.

18. For Buell, such a work exhibits these three characteristics: (1) “The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. . . . [(2)] The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. . . . [and, (3)] Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation” (*Environmental Imagination* 7).

19. There is certainly a parallel to be made here between wine enthusiasts and comics fans!

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