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The Big Warehouse

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La Nuit des Idées 2024 : un dialogue entre une chercheuse et une illustratrice

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Notre participation à la Nuit des idées de Londres ([voir l'article correspondant](#)), a pris la forme d'un dialogue... entre Delphine Mercier, sociologue, et Mélanie Forné, illustratrice, toutes deux membres du projet Le Grand Entrepôt.

Comment combiner recherche et illustration ? Comment nourrir les questions sociologiques avec l'image ? Alimenter l'image pour lui donner plus de sens ? Cette collaboration hors normes était le cœur de notre présentation, que nous vous présentons ci-dessous, accompagné des images projetées lors de la soirée.

Ce dialogue (présenté en anglais) a donné lieu à de belles discussions avec un public à la fois exigeant et curieux. Merci pour ces échanges !

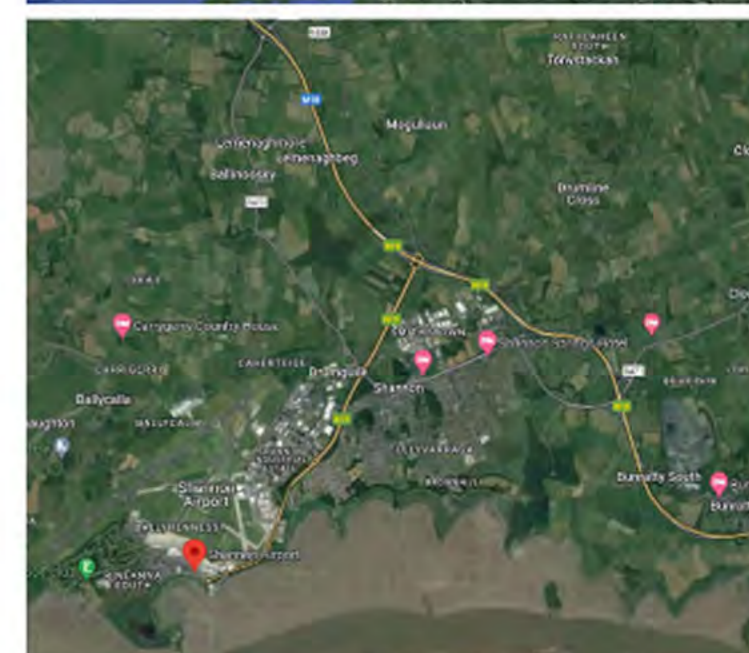
Nous remercions [Anne-Sophie Gabillas](#) pour la relecture et l'aide à la traduction.

Tell me, Meli...



D– Hey Méli, would you be interested in crossing the border and come and help with our contemporary 'observations' ? I know it's certainly less artistic and esthetic than Mayan ceramics, but I'd really like you to come and have a look at the sedimentation that man has built above sea level... You don't need your trowel, just your pencil and your brush...

D– In 1958, a bonded goods processing zone developed around Shannon airport in Ireland. Little did the world know that a new way of producing was being created. This was the origin of the second form of globalisation, a form of capitalism based on economic differentials and regional complementarities. We also had no idea that this bonded model, which had existed in ports for several centuries, would in fact lead to a new way of producing. And above all, we had no idea that globalisation was going to use raw materials, know-how and human beings according to the territory to which they belonged, i.e. according to their costs, skills and mobility...





D– What we want to analyse under the term “warehouse economy” is a set of economic, social and territorial transformations resulting from what certain economists and sociologists have called the “logistics revolution”.

M– The logistics revolution? But what does that mean?

D– Oh My God! you really don’t understand anything... Hang on, I’ll explain. Imagine this. Once upon a time...

M– Ah, great, a story...

D– Once upon a time, the chief docker was standing on the quayside in Genoa, watching the unloading of containers onto a huge ship that had just arrived. Do you know what the dockers were?



M– Yes, yes, the guys in the ports who unload the goods from the ships, big muscular guys.

D– That’s it. Before the 60s, when goods arrived by ship, they were packed in crates, hundreds of crates. But since the 60s, all these crates are stored in large containers. And that changes everything!

M– Really, why...?

D– This chief docker in the port of Genoa is watching the first containers being unloaded thanks to an overhead crane (as you can imagine, the dockers couldn’t carry a container, even with their strong arms). And then he turns pale: he’s just realised that the machine is moving the containers... and replacing the work of the dockers... and he thinks of all those guys with their big arms who will soon be out of work.



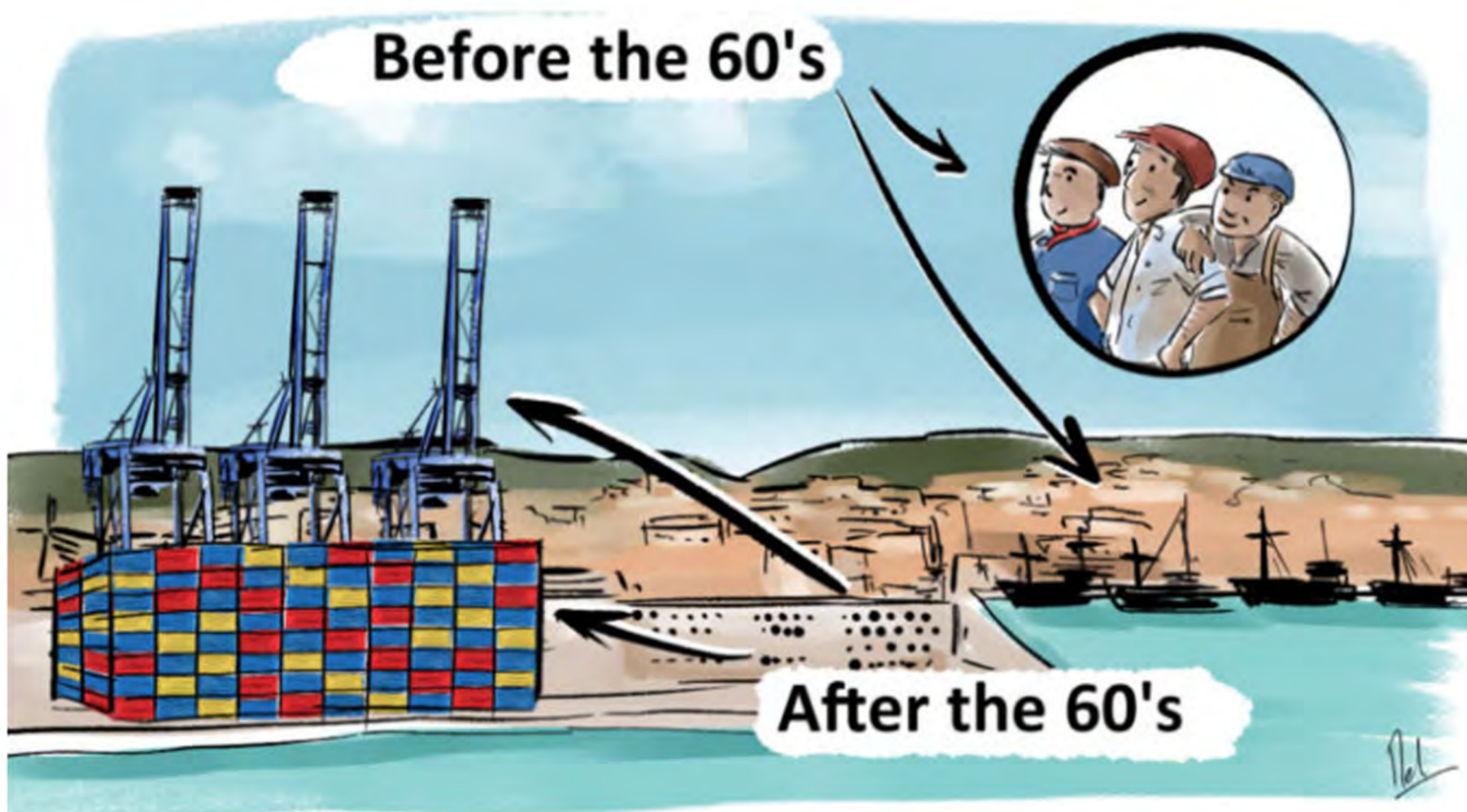
M– Like when factories started to replace



D– Exactly! And it goes even further... people complained but that didn't stop the evolution that was underway. We needed bigger ports to accommodate the goods in these large containers. The ports moved out of the towns... the shops around the ports gradually closed... and these large containers, where the goods are invisible, changed the whole way goods were transported: transporting them, unloading them, loading them onto another ship, with increasingly huge and complex machines... All this implies profound changes in the way work is organised, in the way towns are laid out, and in people's living conditions. That's what we call the logistics revolution!

M– Mmmhhhhh

D– Have you stopped listening to me?



D– Oh, ah ok, yes that's it... you've drawn everything... it's true that it's clearer when you see it like that.

M– Now I understand much better

D– In France, 8 million square meters of warehouses have been built in recent years. These are behemoths of minimalist architecture where almost two million people now work. These sorting and storage centres, originally located in airport zones, are now grouped together at the crossroads of road, motorways and rail networks in the middle of areas with no clear territorial character, whether urban, rural or tourists. In some cases, a MacDonald's and a F1 hotel are added, along with a few trees and a water supply in case of fire.

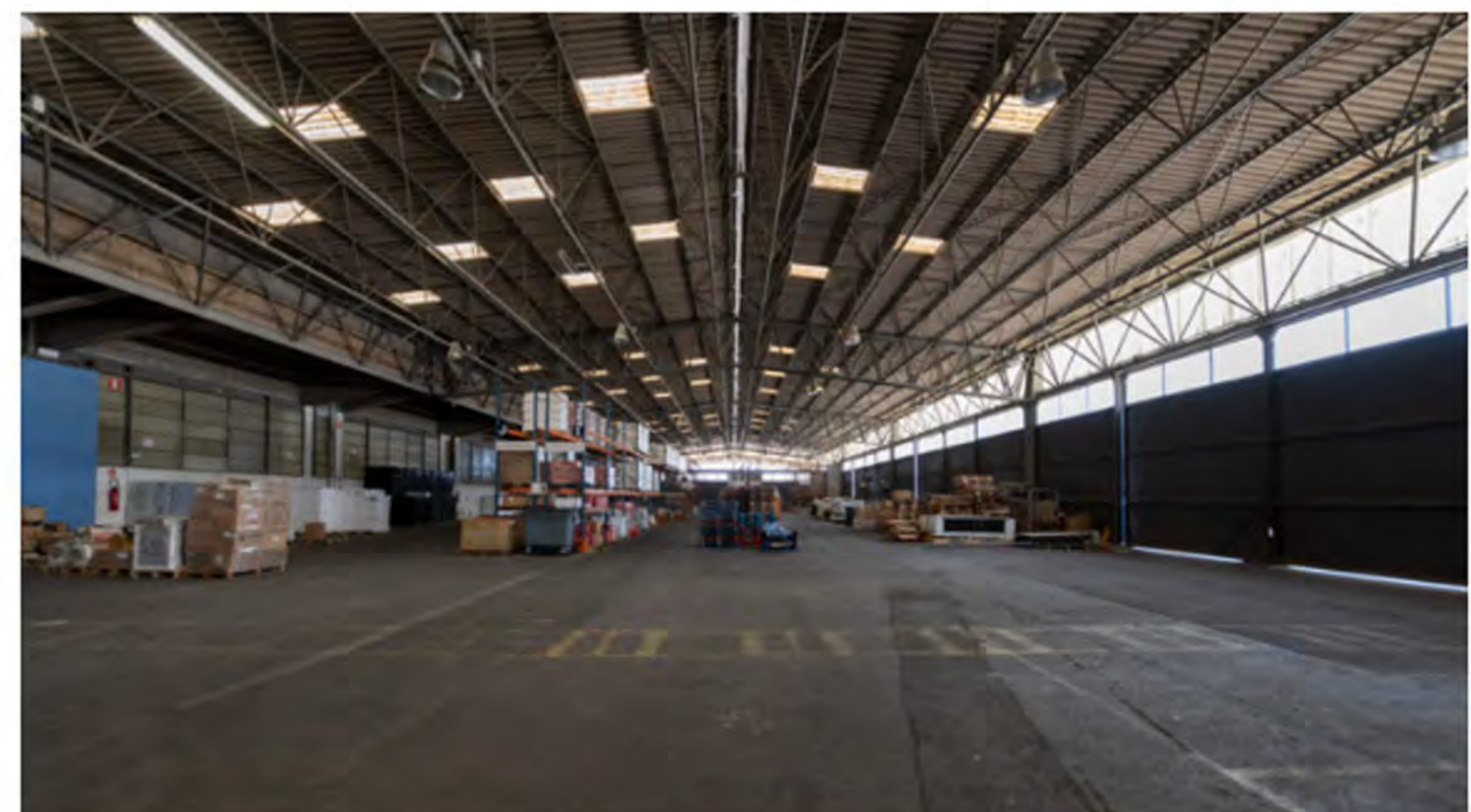


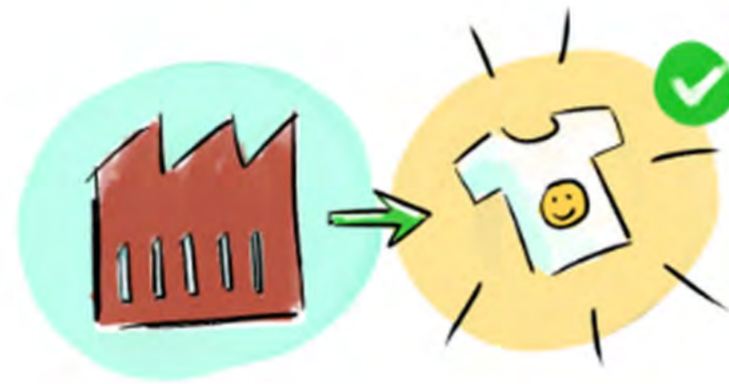
Photo Jean-Michel Mélat-Couhet 2021



Photos Nike.com, and Gilles Wirtz

D– Amazon now has nine distribution sites in France, the largest of which, located on a former air base in Augny near Metz, covers 182,000 m². A dwarf compared with the giants that Amazon has built on US soil, the largest of which, in Tennessee, covers 334,451 square metres. The same state, with its strategic location, is home to other storage giants, such as the Nike distribution centre, with 260,000 square metres of sportswear and footwear.

D– In the old cycle, goods completed their value cycle when they left the factory.



Today, the cycle is only completed when it leaves the first container where it was stored. In containers, like our second-hand clothes, many of the objects stored are still only incomplete goods, quasi goods. For them to become complete commodities and complete their capitalist cycle, they often need to be assembled, packaged and staged.



D– In short, production, in the strict sense of the term, is no longer directly the place where the profit cycle is completed.

It all begins, we think, in the warehouse, in the broadest sense of the term, from the container to the fulfilment center. Everything also ends in the wildest, most primitive version of storage: landfill sites.

Of course, the economic cycle cannot be reduced solely to the primacy of storage over production. Circulation is actually the most important stage. Production is nothing because circulation is everything.

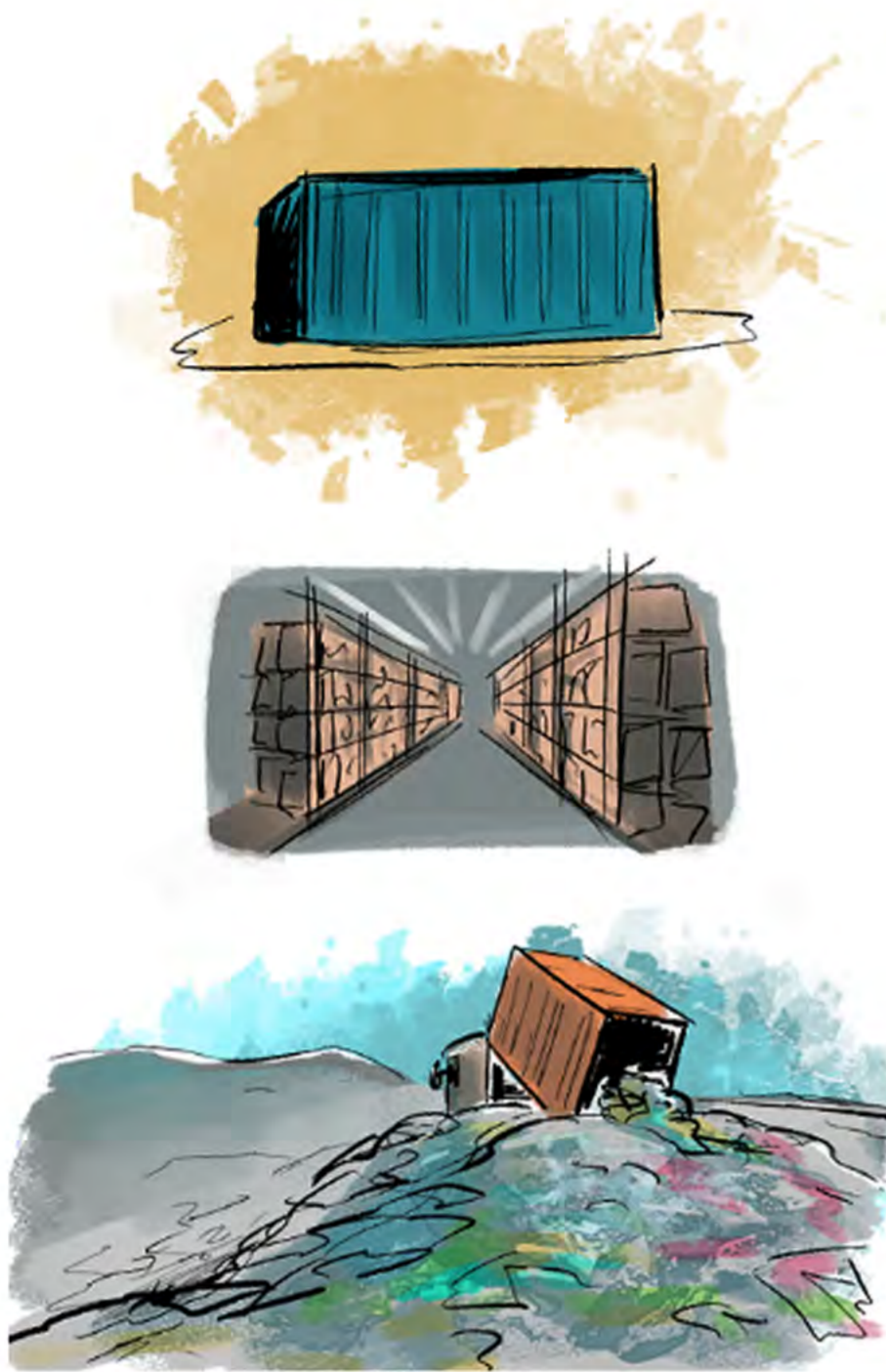
Circulation, the almost perpetual movement of goods, people, information and money. In the contemporary form of supply chains, this means that production is now at the service of circulation, that the warehouse replaces the factory in the formation of value, that it is, in its mobile form – the container – or in its fixed form – the fulfilment centre – the moment when the cycle of value is completed. Being a workplace is what makes the warehouse the central figure in this cycle: the modern warehouse has nothing to do with what it was in the days of the factory, the great car parks of the Ford or Renault factories that have been shown over and over again. In the modern warehouse, goods are stored, assembled, packaged, sometimes adorned, and loaded with meaning. In Panama's Colón free zone, thousands of shops sell the logos of fashionable clothing brands.

M– (smiling like I've got it) Ah, OK! It's going to be fascinating!

D– Why don't you come and draw our research?

M– (tense smile) But how?

D– Yes, you'd help us get our research across to a wider audience, not just specialists... and it would make our work more enjoyable, even for us, if it was accompanied by illustrated pictures.



Research project
The Big Warehouse

Part des EVP en transit dans les différents ports d'enquêtes



Map by David Lagarde

D– Furthermore, you could travel, you know, the researchers in our team are going to study storage sites in at least 9 countries around the world... in Europe and even in England, in the Middle East, in America, in the Mediterranean... you could perhaps accompany researchers on certain missions... and draw all that... What do you think?

M– (to the audience) And we've done it!

D– (to the audience) We're still doing it!

M– Tropical beaches are mine! And for the first fieldwork, the first meeting with the sociologists, you'll never guess where they took me... to the northern suburbs of Marseille!



Photo Jean-Michel Mélat-Couhet, 2021

D– We started by getting all the researchers together to talk about the project and see who would do what. There are 25 of us, so it's not easy to coordinate!

M– Oh yes, three days of discussions to get you to agree and get to grips with the subject. It was fascinating, inspiring and exhausting all at the same time... but I must say that the team is pretty resilient... after 3 days of meetings, to relax, some of you went on to play chess!





D– What did you think of your first field study?

M– It was magical, actually! I saw a real warehouse! People starting work at 5 o'clock in the morning! Young and old, men and women, and then it's a real ballet in there, there's movement, spinning, but also laughter, there are colours everywhere, music to set the mood...

D– It's actually a warehouse for an Amazon subcontractor. The spaces are desperately empty and organised so that everything circulates and nothing is left behind. Everyone has their role: the runners, the flashers, the manager, the yard marshals, there were colour codes for classifying parcels, label codes for parcels returned by customers, and an employment contract system that encourages staff turnover, with managers who do everything to adapt the organisation for the employees, while remaining within their customer's standards and requirements...



M– So you've seen all this?

D– ...and then there's Virginie who repairs damaged parcels, Nakib who manages the staff, Yliès who'd really like us to change that young people's music...

M– It's true that in just a few hours you understood everything that was going on in the warehouse... while I was still marveling at the skill of the yard marshals and the colours of the parcels... Your way of looking at things helps me to understand them better, especially the things I can't see!

D– It's okay, we each have our own ways, our own questions, our own surprises, and even our own jargon...

M– Oh, the jargon...

D– You know the jargon that some companies use... it's crazy, it's a real dialect... you'd need a dictionary to understand...

SOFIANE et IHED en WBR



LE DIALECTE AMAZONIEN - UNE HISTOIRE DE DELPHINE, MALIK ET THOMAS



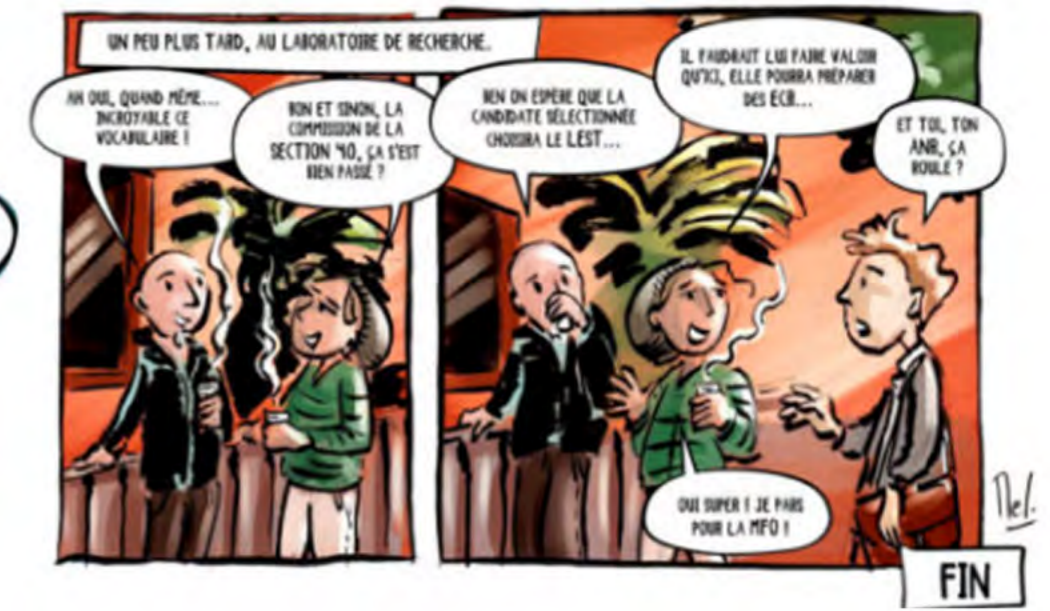
M– Well, yours isn't bad either, is it... with all your acronyms. ANR, MFO, Section 40, 31, 310...

D– Um... yes, OK... I suppose... Let's go back to our topic: your next mission was Panama!

M– Oh, yes, great! Exotic! The Panama Canal!

D– A fascinating investigation!

M– Yes! When I joined you there, I felt like I'd arrived in a detective film... It was like detectives trying to foil terrible plots...



Panama



D– In fact, what caught our attention right away in Panama was the huge difference between Panama City and Colón, the two-port cities located at either end of the Canal. Both cities see the same container ships pass through, with goods coming from all over the world (6% of world trade). Panama City is a real capital with all that entails in terms of company headquarters and various infrastructure... but Colón...! It's exactly the opposite. It's a derelict city, with crumbling houses in the heart of the city centre and crime zones. This difference is linked to historical issues that need to be studied: the presence of the United States for over 100 years, the recent retrocession, imported discrimination...



M– Oh yes, that, how many times have we been told not to go to Colón because it's too dangerous...

D– ...an incredible social misery... and incomprehensible. So, we had to go and get some information...

M– (talking to the audience) ... they follow leads, formulate hypotheses, which they immediately question when they get new information...

D– Well, those drawings are nice, they're pretty... but apart from the atmosphere, they don't say much.

M– It's just that sometimes I don't know where to look. You look at everything, you make connections in your mind, but sometimes I find it hard to follow...



D– For example, your drawing of the boats there... it's beautiful, but the other day, there were some children swimming in the water just in front of the wreck... we couldn't make pictures of them, don't you want to add them?

D– That's it... thank you, that's more representative: the social conditions of the local people who face up to the distant and powerful multinationals that pass them by without contributing anything socially.

M– You can tell all that just by adding these little silhouettes...?

D– The same goes for the dilapidated houses... do you remember our astonished reaction when we realised that people were living in them?





M– Oh yes, it was terrible... appalling living conditions...

D– The architect we met explained the problems of urban planning and the dilapidation of the city centre, which has lost 25% of its population in the last 20 years... we still haven't managed to understand exactly why, but we'll get there in the end!

M– It's true that to show this in pictures, it's very tricky to take photos on the spot...

D– Yes, photos are great, but they can be seen as intrusive, or even aggressive... whereas drawings...

M– We represent people without drawing their portrait, without pointing at them... people become emblematic characters of a situation, of a context observed in the field.



D– Yes, it can be much more than just a pretty landscape. In this market, remember, all the fruit and vegetable stalls were owned by Asians, it was striking! Remember who built the Panama Canal. The Chinese stayed in Colon after the construction of the railway and the Canal, and some of them developed very important companies in the retail sector.

M– That's right, you pointed that out to me, but it's impossible to take photos there too... Hang on, I'm making changes...



M– Without your eyes, my drawings would be a bit empty... on the other hand, I spend a lot of time asking you questions that must sometimes seem really stupid or simplistic...

D– Oh yes, sometimes we start from scratch with you! But no, it forces us to reformulate and clarify certain things in our thinking... don't worry, that helps us a lot too.



M– That's good then...

D– Yes, it is good...



M– There are still so many images to produce... so many things to say that you've only said in an academic way...

D– Yes... we've got a lot of work ahead of us! But we're getting there, and we're almost ready to publish. We really want to disseminate our results as widely as possible! We're using your images to communicate with the public, and also for posters at scientific conferences and meetings.

M– We're going to add illustrations to your publications, to tell stories in a lighter rather than strictly scientific way, in comics, for example.

D– Yes, anything that helps our voice to be heard will be welcome!

M– And where's the next field trip?



D– Bolivia... are you ready to huff and puff at an altitude of 4000 m to meet researchers who are passionate about warehouses?

M– : You bet I am !

