

**Melanie Le Touze
and Zackie Schneyders** The Brennilis plant, A
Nuclear Ghost at the
Gates of Hell

The following is an excerpt from our ongoing project on the Brennilis plant in the Monts d'Arrée in Finistère, France, which has been a nuclear ghost since 1985. The project combines photography, interviews, and philosophical reflections. It aims to show how the myths and legends of Brittany (France) overlap with the lifeworlds of inhabitants around the Brennilis plant in an effort to highlight the impact nuclear technology has on its surrounding area. We juxtapose this documentation with sociological, philosophical, and literary reflections. In converging these elements the project combines each aspect to create something new altogether. Our approach is echoed by the use of Lomography, a photographic technique that admits flaws and blurs, heavy vignettes, unusual lightening, apparitions and tinctures, illuminating those haunting aspects and ghostly traces in lived environments less obvious to the unmediated eye. As typical with all ghostly matters, ours is a work still in progress.

Nuclear power is the leading source of electricity production and consumption in France, with 56 reactors spread throughout the country. Currently, France is in the midst of a debate about the revival of the civil nuclear industry with a new programme announced by the President in 2022. A regular topic in the media, the debate is fuelled by problems linked to climate change such as the scarcity of water, a resource needed in huge amounts for the cooling of nuclear reactors. Security issues are also causing people to reflect on the wisdom of using nuclear power. How safe are nuclear sites in the face of climate disasters, terrorism, or war?

What about our energy needs and dependencies, an issue crystallised by the current inflationary crisis linked to the war in Ukraine? Who decides on the location for a nuclear plant? And how do residents react to such decisions? Nuclear power plants are not only the result of technical considerations, but they also have an impact on collective memories, forms of organisation, and on the experiences of those who live near (and not so near) by. These questions have led us to reflect on the past, present, and future of the first nuclear plants in France.

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Figure 1. Full moon, Lake Saint-Michel, January 2020.

*On raconte qu'il est des lieux où parfois
la réalité prend des allures particulières.
Des lieux, où l'esprit se perd
entre le vrai, et le possible.*

– Chartier (2014, 55)

*It is said that there are places where sometimes
reality takes on a particular aspect.
Places, where the mind gets lost
between the true and the possible.*

To come to the Monts d'Arrée mountain range is to set foot into an 'elsewhere.' The territory is at the heart of Penn-ar-bed, the end of the world in Breton, or the 'Finistère' on the most westerly point of France. It is a unique environmental, social, and historical area, characterised by its low population density, exceptional biodiversity, an age-old rural way of life adapted to these particular conditions, and its ancestral culture of myths and legends. Till this day, Breton is spoken by a large proportion of the population.

It is a place where the so-called 'modern' and 'ancient' world coexist and confront each other, generating paradoxical and striking narratives for those who know to observe them. This small piece of Brittany also saw the appearance of what would become one of the first French nuclear ghosts: In 1962, an experimental heavy water nuclear power plant was built by EDF (Électricité De France) in the communes of Brennilis and Loqueffret. Located on the edge of the Nestavel Dam which regulates the waters of the artificial lake Saint-Michel, it was shut down in 1985 and has been in the process of being dismantled ever since.

The impact of the nuclear plant can be seen at different levels of society. Relatively speaking, we all live next to nuclear power plants, more or less aware of their activity. Whether we hate them, defend them, or fear them, they visibly exist in our environments and have transformed those environments over the last 60 years. Nuclear power plants have influenced science from experimentation to the development of advanced technology, they are objects of pressure and authoritarian threats. Politicians are talking about shutdown or revival, reconstruction or dismantling, burial or orbiting of waste. Nuclear power plants, in other words, create tales of anticipation, atomic scientific hegemony, or post-nuclear frights, provoking questions about control or potential accidents. They will continue to impact living beings for centuries; playing with our imagination and thoughts, even if they, and their products are not always visible. In any case, what is certain, is that the nuclear ghost is already haunting us.

Since 2020, intrigued and magnetized by these chaotic perspectives, we, Zackie Schneyders, photographer, and Melanie Le Touze, lecturer at the University of Nantes, have gone to meet this region well-known as a land of warm welcomes. During a visit, we encountered many people and realized that the nuclear ghost in Brennilis reactivates the myths and legends of this region in Brittany, partly fed by the communication games between transparency and opacity of the authorities and EDF. Accordingly, we tried to approach the subject of this territory and its nuclear power plant as a social fact¹ which is interpreted in perceptions, stories, and organisations. We started to collect the stories and imaginaries of the

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¹ Bretesché et al. 2021 describe the socio-historical, linguistic and social dimensions of nuclear issues.

inhabitants of these places around the power plant. In addition, our work is informed by newspaper articles, documentaries, public documents from EDF, and meetings with anti-nuclear or environmentalist groups in the region. All of the views are themselves superimposed with our own views, which are ostensibly “external” to the region.

In this sense, the stories we collect are mixed with what this environment evokes for us and which we translate into lomographic and analogue images, where photographic fiction sometimes catches up with reality through experiments. In addition to the use of her regular analogue camera, Schneyders composes images with the lomographic camera, which is made entirely out of plastic, without cells or electricity, and thus must be used in an instinctive manner. Seeking the photographic accident by using 120 mm film, a 6×6, and a lens cap to distort the exposures, her work provokes a confrontation between the visible and the invisible, resulting in unpredictable outcomes.

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Figure 2. Overexposed image from the nuclear power plant of Brennilis, the lake Saint-Michel, the marsh, the sailing school, and the edge of the Nestavel Dam. March 2023.

We invite audiences to step into these unplanned images and legends, in order to transcend the rational pros and cons of nuclear debates; instead playing with the contradictions that arise from these poetics. We willingly lose ourselves in these experiments, while finding different paths to share the questions that have aroused our curiosity: what narratives are created after so much time spent living with a nuclear ghost? What kind of new narratives are created, mixing old legends with new technologies? To which (and whose) past, present, and future imaginations do they appeal? What can these local representations tell us about wider perceptions of current issues in the world? In line with this set up, our project is produced entirely on an experimental basis. It is a means of crossing multiple viewpoints and revealing the questions that have guided our approach, but which also emerged during various spontaneous meetings.



Figure 3. *Night of mayor's wishes, Brennilis village. January 2020.*

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Figure 4. *Church of the Saint-Michel de Braspart, in reconstruction. Landscape after fire in 2022. March 2023.*

During the summer of 2022, a fire destroyed a big part of the Monts d'Arrée, creating a post-apocalyptic landscape. These photos show the burnt landscape and the small church of the Mont-Saint-Michel de Braspart which was also destroyed by the fire in 2022.

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Living in the Monts d'Arrée Mountain Range: The Relationship Between Residents and their Environment

Il était une fois, dans la lande bretonne, le long de la rivière Elez, entre 200 et 300 mètres d'altitude, une région tranquille peuplée d'elfes et d'animaux sauvages, au pied de la modeste montagne Saint-Michel, où s'alanguissaient quelques communes qui ne demandaient rien à personne : Brennilis, Botmeur, Loqueffret, et La Feuillée. [...] Avant d'en venir au nucléaire, il faut rêver un peu et raconter à quel point cette Bretagne de landes, de granit et de légendes, est belle.

–Vadrot (2012, 1)

Once upon a time, in the Breton moors, along the river Elez, between 200 and 300 metres above sea level, there was a quiet region populated by elves and wild animals, at the foot of the modest Saint-Michel Mountain, where a few communes that asked nothing from anyone lay: Brennilis, Botmeur, Loqueffret, and La Feuillée. [...] Before coming to the nuclear issue, we must dream a little and convey how beautiful this Brittany of moors, granite, and legends is.



Figure 5. *Dawn in the land*, Youn Elez. January 2020.

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*Des monstres s'arrachaient à l'argile
Pour un rugissement silencieux
Souvenir de quand le chaos régnait
Des pics surgissaient, des abîmes s'ouvraient
Feu, foudre,
Eaux et tempêtes
Le monde allait commencer
Les Monts d'Arrée s'élever à huit mille mètres
Il s'étaient refroidis maintenant
Dégonflés peu à peu
Il n'en restait que les os
La structure essentielle*

–Tangi (2003, 21)

*Monsters ripped from the clay
To roar silently
A memory of chaos rules
Peaks surged, an abyss opened
Fire, thunder, water, storm
The earth is birthing
The Monts d'Arrée rise up to 8000 metres
They have cooled now
Shrunk little by little
It's only the bones that rest
The essential structure*

To understand Breton mythology and legends it is necessary to retrace the various paths of hybridization that occurred in the history of the peoples in Brittany via the Gauls, Celts, and Christians. These stories of domination, protest, and resilience overlap.

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Figure 6. After an emergency alarm, around Saint Herbot. January 2020.

The nuclear station is one of the thorny issues when you live here. Because here, we are on a site that has a very particular place on a historical scale. That is to say, it's a history that revolves around the Celtic peoples, who transmitted their stories through oral tradition; they did not write anything down. The basin in which the nuclear power station was built in the sixties, is one of the places that could be described as 'energetically negative' [in Celtic logic]. The Yeun Elez marsh was a place that was vigorously studied, revered, controlled, and used by the druids. But these are "notions that don't fit with modern science today. It is a place of great

electromagnetic incidence. But in the 1960s, when it was decided to build a nuclear power plant there, it was the same time when they didn't care about the life in the ground. But in fact, this plant has never been able to function properly. [...] Yeun Elez is the place where the philosophy of here is linked to the observation of nature, and both are in opposition to the modernism of the sixties" (B., resident).

"Before the nuclear station was built, we had a meeting in the village. And to the one who was against it, I said: what about you, if you're in the hospital and suddenly there's no electricity, what do you think about that? And what about the agricultural machinery, in your opinion, how does it work? I never feared the nuclear station" (A., resident).

"And while I was cleaning the public toilet, a couple talked to me. They were tourists and they asked me about the nuclear power plant and told me better not to get in contact with the water. I asked them why they came on holidays here if they fear the nuclear plant. There was never a problem with that nuclear plant" (A., resident).

Électricité De France (EDF) Shows You the Way.

On the site of the nuclear reactor, there is also the *Maison du Lac*. In this EDF information centre, we discover what EDF and other actors have done to rehabilitate the fauna and flora of the lake, as well as the confidence people have in the quality of this environment. Flyers, used as highly effective communication tools adapt information about the nuclear reactor to local narratives: "Brennilis, a legend that can be visited all year round." The image of the power station surrounded by carefree deer invites us to appreciate it for what it would be then, a part of Brittany incorporated into its identity; it's 'magic.' By using the terms "inescapable and majestic" or "perfectly integrated, harmless and invisible," we can quietly forget about the existence of the nuclear reactor'.

"So, you're talking about the publication made by the Armorique Regional Nature Park. The lake is a popular subject for photographers, though the power station is usually left out 'of the frame'. It's always photos with skewed angles where the power station never appears" (B., resident).



Figure 7. Overexposed images from the nuclear power plant of Brennilis, the lake Saint-Michel, the marsh, the sailing school, and the edge of the Nestavel Dam. January 2020.

“I told you that I am a fisherman. But the lake around the power plant, I don’t fish there. It is the cooling pond of the nuclear power plant. There have been exceptional floods and the water from the floods has invaded the power station’s waste storage area. The storage facilities are watertight, but afterwards we can either trust them or not. The lake could be contaminated. And what do we do with this lake: the biggest fishing spot in Brittany? And next to it, they have created a youth centre: a day-care centre and a sailing school. And people consider that if they have created a sailing school, it is proof that there is no risk. It’s a proof by the absurd, you understand what I mean?” (B., resident).

“We are waiting for the government’s decree to start the work [of dismantling the reactor]. When we start, we estimate that it will take 17 years to complete the work. At the end of the 17 years, there will be nothing left, there will be no trace of what remains today in the landscape” (Maison du Lac, EDF guide).

The Monts d'Arrée Mountain Range: Land of Paradoxes

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Thought is addressed and associated with image and memory, with the challenge of reifying the nuclear age, its paradigmatic change, and the emergence of atomic deterrence. This specific thought is elaborated by various media formats: science fiction literature haunted by the last survivors, or by the myth of the absolute weapon of destruction, comics and their superheroes doped with radioactivity, manga and the reiterated trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, cinema, series between prefiguration and metaphor, music and its anticipation of the apocalypse, and finally, the video game, which explores post-apocalyptic landscapes with resilience. The stories rehearse the arguments of the anti-nuclear protests in Brittany since the seventies. The most emblematic example, the protest of Plogoff. Brennilis, which is geographically located on one of



Figure 8. *A Photographic Accident*, next to Lake Saint-Michel, January 202

the gates of hell, is featured in Fournier's comic strip from the adventures of Spirou and Fantasio, *L'Ankou* (1977). The Ankou, a character in Breton mythology, appears on the cover of the comic strip while to its right the nuclear power station of Brennilis explodes. The Ankou collects the souls of the dead and deposits them in Yeun Elez, the clay field that lies between heaven and hell and now around the Brennilis nuclear station. This mixing of the nuclear station of Brennilis with Ankou and other legends of Brittany is repeated in *Bran Ruz*, a comic from Auclair and Deschamps.

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Figure 9. EDF campaign, the caption reads: "It's not science fiction, it's just science"

Affected from the outset by ambivalent imagery, nuclear power lends itself to an imaginary projection of the hopes and fears of each era, with aesthetics varying according to the decades and their references to accidents, wars, or disaster. Thus, nuclear power crystallizes images of Promethean omnipotence and regeneration on the one hand, and of apoca-

lyptic catastrophe and total loss of control on the other. A mixture of fantasies and realities structures the ambivalent imaginations surrounding nuclear energy. The question remains: What is this nuclear ghost able to tell us?

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Melanie Le Touze is lecturer for the German Academic Exchange Service at the University of Nantes in France. In her studies of Romance languages and literature and history at the Heidelberg University she started to be interested in myths and legends of Brittany and Basque country. Her research focuses on intercultural studies, foreign language didactics, and current topics from Romance studies.

Zackie Schneyders is a photographer, who works for sociocultural associations and artists in Belgium. Her camera focuses on collectives, social projects, and regions where people are fighting to protect their environments. Rather discreet in personality, she prefers to take a backseat and let people tell their own stories.

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