

# Chroniques d'une station-service

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In his novel *Chroniques d'une station-service*, Alexandre Labruffe raises a political question: What impact do petrol consumption and Western mobility culture have on Western civilization – and on the world at large? In order to answer this question, Labruffe transforms the petrol station from a background setting into a narrative device that exposes the hidden mechanics of our petro-modernity. Once seen as a symbol of freedom and mobility, in Labruffe's novel the petrol station becomes a mirror of our time – a place where the promise of smooth, fast movement is overshadowed by ecological collapse and global inequality.

The plot seems straightforward: set in a petrol station in the Parisian banlieue in the present day, the novel recounts the daily routine of attendant Beauvoire through a series of numbered vignettes. These short scenes capture his ironic, often cynical impressions of the station and its customers. However, the title suggests that the petrol station itself is the protagonist, indicating Labruffe's deeper intention to portray this overlooked site not as a "non-place" (Marc Augé), but rather as a "contact zone," as Jörg Dünne adapts Latour's concept of the "critical zone" to literary analysis, describing how literary texts depict concrete places that span wide temporal and spatial dimensions. This links the local to the planetary, and challenges the anthropocentric perspective.

Following the logic of Latour and Dünne, the reader is confronted with a harsh criticism of several complex and interconnected phenomena linked to the Western petroculture, which is still encouraged and supported by politics and the economy. These phenomena are hidden by the neon-kitsch façade of the petrol station: overconsumption, imperialist oil extraction and production as well as the Western dependance on black gold and the ecological consequences of individual traffic. Labruffe addresses these critical issues through a narrative primarily based on polysemy (including that based on phonetic similarity) and an overall play on signifié/signifiant, deliberately following in the footsteps of one of the leading figures of French postmodernism: Jean Baudrillard. Labruffe references Baudrillard already in the paratext of his work, citing a phrase from his famous *Amérique*, but replacing "le sens" (the sense) with "l'essence" (petrol). This refers to the main object found at petrol stations, shifting the focus from humans to objects from the outset.

Additionally, through polysemy based on phonetic similarity, Labruffe merges human and non-human characters through their names: the petrol station attendant Beauvoire is joined by his friends Nietzland and Jean Pol, whose names blend the ones of Simone de Beauvoir, Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre, with elements of nature: land, Voire (a river in the departments of Haute-Marne and Aube), and Pol (the Earth's poles). Furthermore, the brand and model names of the cars mentioned, such as "Renault Espace", "Opel Astra Cosmo" and "Subara", extend the geographical setting of the novel to a cosmic atmosphere. Meanwhile, juxtapositions of several geographical locations mainly refer to the USA as a historical pioneer of a developed individual transport systems, as well as the world's leading car nation. Signs such as flags refer to Trinidad and Tobago as a major oil-exporting country that suffers from its resource curse.

Another important aspect is the criticism of Western consumer logic. Labruffe stages this ironically

and cruelly at the same time when the petrol station attendant observes the customers' excessive yet pointless shopping and describes a petrol shortage, portraying the drivers as panicked and desperate petrol addicts. This also references Baudrillard, who refers to speed as the basis of an intoxicating amnesia for motorists in his *Amérique*; here, Labruffe makes petrol, and by extension the material objects of petroculture – as well as other objects, such as plastic – responsible for this amnesia.

Labruffe's novel reminds us that infrastructures like petrol stations belong to a class of paradoxical objects: they are essential for modern life yet are largely unnoticed unless they malfunction. Although we rarely consider their existence, if we pay closer attention, these "invisible" places reveal their significance as sites of global entanglement and environmental importance.

**LANGUAGE:** French / Français

**CENSORSHIP STATUS:**