



HAL
open science

The voices of the tree: what semiotic construction for a social and environmental symbol of life? Analysis of the recent media and popular narrative emergence of the figure of the tree in France

Céline Pascual Espuny, Céline Cholet, Andrea Catellani

► To cite this version:

Céline Pascual Espuny, Céline Cholet, Andrea Catellani. The voices of the tree: what semiotic construction for a social and environmental symbol of life? Analysis of the recent media and popular narrative emergence of the figure of the tree in France. 17th biennial Conference on Communication and Environment (COCE 2023): Many Voices, One planet: Accounting for the past and narrating sustainable futures, International Environmental Communication Association, Jun 2023, Harrisonburg, Virginia, United States. hal-04123185

HAL Id: hal-04123185

<https://hal.science/hal-04123185v1>

Submitted on 9 Jun 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

THE VOICES OF THE TREE

WHAT SEMIOTIC CONSTRUCTION FOR A SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SYMBOL OF LIFE?

Analysis of the recent media and popular narrative emergence of the figure of the tree in France

Céline Pascual Espuny,
Université Aix Marseille
Laboratoire IMSIC UR 7492,
celine.pascual@univ-amu.fr

Céline Cholet
Université Catholique de l'Ouest
Centre Humanité et Sociétés, MICA
ccholet@uco.fr

Andrea Catellani
Université Catholique de Louvain
ILC Institute LASCO Laboratory
andrea.catellani@uclouvain.be

Key words: Voice,
tree,
media emergence,
semiology



QUESTION RESEARCH

How does the popular, aesthetic, artistic and scientific emergence of the tree fit into the broader interdiscursive framework of the narrative of the plant and, more broadly, of the living?

Rediscovering and reinterpreting the figure of the tree: a complex, cultural, ambivalent endearing figure

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Quantitative and semiotic media analysis of a corpus of about a hundred French books
2. Narratological and semiotic tools of best-selling books
3. Elaboration and construction of a renewed glance through tree documentaries



EMERGENCE OF A “PLANT” DISCOURSE IN THE FRENCH PUBLIC SPACE

requalifying our gaze and questioning our relationship with the living world
(Baluska & Mancuso, 2020, Coccia, 2016, Burgat, 2020).

Scientific essays

(Calvo, Keijzer, 2009; Gagliano & alii, 2012; Mancuso, 2018; Trewavas, 2016; Calvo, Gagliano, 2020; Parise & alii, 2020)

General literature

(Pollan 2001; Tassin, 2016; Chamovitz, 2020; Wohlleben, 2016; Mancuso & Viola, 2015)



a broader artistic and literary movement in France

knowledge of the plant world

(Segundo-Ortin & Calvo, 2021)

intelligence

(Trewavas, 2003, 2016; Calvo, Gagliano, Souza, Trewavas, 2020; Nick, 2021)

consciousness

(Segundo-Ortin & Calvo, 2021)



EMERGENCE OF A "TREE" DISCOURSE IN THE FRENCH PUBLIC SPACE



2016



2017



2018



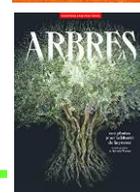
2019



2020



2021



2022



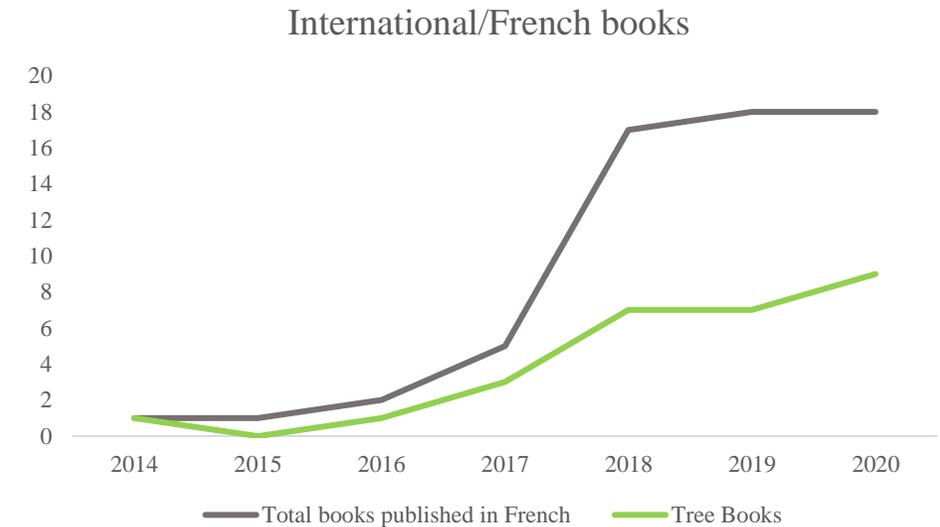
4

TREE AS A SYNECDOCHE AND AN ACTIVE BEING

- questioning this figure in our narratives
(Kull, 2000, Faucher 2014, Lawrence 2021)
- understanding the broader ontological shift we are making today regarding the relationship between nature and culture (Descola, 2005, 2021).

The place of the tree is emblematic:

- venerable old beings,
- witnesses of our times and servants of our uses,
- shelters, solid and protective,
- but also as fragile, at our mercy.



THE HIDDEN LIFE OF TREES: SOME SEMIOTIC FEATURES

- « The Hidden Life of Trees », Peter Wohlleben (Original German ed.: 2015; French 1st edition: 2017).
- The author: « *I suddenly discovered countless extraordinary phenomena whose explanation eluded me* ».
 - Conversion from functional rationalism to passion for trees as living creatures
 - Mediator (« *follow me, let's share the happiness that trees can give us* »).
- The trees: « *... a tree is sensitive to pain and has a memory [...] tree-parents live with their children ...* ».
 - Intentionalist language: attribution of an interiority (often undiscussed)
 - complete narrative skilled subjects, endowed with modalities (have to do, want to do, know how to do...)



FICTION OR REALITY

- **Questions** : How in this novel trees are narrated and actantialized? This question is part of a broader reflection on plants: how are they, and particularly the figure of the tree, the object of renewed attention in a context of biodiversity and climate in crisis?
- Novel by Richard POWERS, *The Overstory*, New York, Norton & Cie, 2018.



FICTION OR REALITY

- « Creature » :
 - *Let me sing you how humans transform into other creatures. Ovid's Metamorphoses, First century.*
- Powers mainly questions, :
 - Our "World" [37 occurrences at least]: *the other world is everywhere in the world* (p. 205)
 - The usefulness of trees [at least 11 occurrences], the utilitarian vision of living things: *Usefulness, that's the catastrophe.* (p. 575)
 - the value of the forest (2 occurrences): *Decay increases the value of the forest.* (p. 425)



THE QUESTION OF GAZE



<https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/i19066146/peter-wohlleben-ingenieur-forestier>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uJhyE9J618>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmbizZL5m8k>

Reconstruction or construction of the visibility and sound of trees both technical and aesthetic that invents a new visual poetics

- **Mediated visibility:** Angle of technical mediations and symbolic supports allowing the extension of the spectrum of "what can be seen"
- **Formal visibility:** through the formalization mechanisms that constitute textual or graphic inscription processes



CONCLUSIONS

- Evidence of a media and narrative emergence
- Ontological change
 - Renewal of the gaze with an important ethical dimension
- Commitment of the figure of the human mediator
 - Spokesperson (researcher, expert or novelist)
 - Question of committed life trajectories (seesaw)
 - Question of extension
- Points of interest: the notion of creature

"To know for sure, it does not exist. The only reliable things are humility and a careful look."

(Richard Powers, L'arbre monde, Paris, Le Cherche midi, 2019, translated from English (United States) by Serge Chauvin, The Overstory, W. W. Norton & Company, 2018:181)

