

NICO CARPENTIER\*

## SILENCING / UNSILENCING NATURE A Participatory Visual Essay on the Right to Flourish

### *Abstract*

The essay is grounded in a reflection on the discursive-material knot, which uses a macro-(con)textual approach to discourse, but also allocates a non-hierarchical position to the material, recognizing its agency. This ontological model is then used to analyse the discursive-material struggles of/over nature, and nonhuman living beings. In particular, the essay reports on a series of Silencing / Unsilencing Nature workshops, which were part of the *Lyssna!* project, and showcases how the photographic signifying practices of a group of youngsters contributed to the unsilencing of nature, and the disruption of several hegemonic discourses.

### *Keywords*

Discursive-material knot; hegemony; ecocentrism; nonhuman living beings; weeds; participation; arts.

ISSN: 03928667 (print) 18277969 (digital)

DOI: 10.26350/001200\_000112

### 1. A DISCURSIVE-MATERIAL APPROACH TO NATURE AND ANIMAL-HUMAN RELATIONS

Discourses are the indispensable and powerful tools that give meaning to our social realities; they are the frameworks of intelligibility that structure humans' relationships with the world, through the provision of meaning. Defined here in a macro-(con)textual way<sup>1</sup>, as structures "in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed"<sup>2</sup>, discourses are knowledge structures that consist out of systemically articulated signifiers that together form reasonably stable entities. Of course, this stability is not total, permanent and to-be-taken-for-granted, even though discourses still aim to protect internal stability and achieve external domination, and thus fixate social reality. But discourses are not outside the political, and even the most hegemonic discourses are always subjected to the continuous threat of dislocation through counter-hegemonic forces.

These discursive struggles over hegemony affect all realms of the world, also including what we refer to as nature. Nature, in its vast diversity and with its many overlappings with the world of human activity, has been discursified in an equally wide

\* Charles University, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Uppsala University – nico.carpentier@fsv.cuni.cz

<sup>1</sup> N. Carpentier, B. De Cleen, "Bringing Discourse Theory into Media Studies", *Journal of Language and Politics*, 6, 2 (2007): 267-295. DOI: 10.1075/jlp.6.2.08car.

<sup>2</sup> E. Laclau, "Metaphor and Social Antagonisms", in C. Nelson, L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988: 249-257 (254).

variety of ways, with many of these discourses engaging in intense struggles over hegemony. For instance, as Corbett<sup>3</sup> argues, there is an entire spectrum of what she calls “environmental ideologies”, that range from unrestrained instrumentalism, over conservationism and preservationism, to transformative ideologies that aim to radically move away from anthropocentric frameworks and embrace ecocentric perspectives. These different discourses all give meaning to the relations of humans with the environment, but do so in always different ways. Moreover, these discourses do not operate in isolation, but engage in almost permanent discursive struggles. And, importantly, some of these discourses<sup>4</sup> are what Stibbe<sup>5</sup> considers destructive discourses, as they “promote inhumane treatment [of animals] and environmental damage”. Instrumentalism is one example, but also speciesism, or the “systematic discrimination against an other based solely on a generic characteristic – in this case, species”<sup>6</sup>, is a discourse that has a strong potential to damage (and destroy) through the combination of classification, hierarchisation and inferiorisation, ignoring what Derrida<sup>7</sup> has called the *animot*, the “irreducible living multiplicity of mortals”.

In the particular discourse-theoretical approach used in this essay, discourses become defined as fundamentally different from language. They are structures of meaning communicated *through* language, which functions as its material carrier and condensation. In other words, discourse is not text, it is what is *behind* the text and what is communicated through the text. As language still might be (at least potentially) too restrictive to capture the wide variety of communicative practices, the notion of signifying practice is preferred here, in the ways that the concept has been used by Hall.<sup>8</sup> Signifying practices are the tools that are used in order to, directly or indirectly, refer to social reality, and to exchange meanings about it. Signifying practices are not limited to humans, though. Nonhuman animals, obviously, also have the capacity to generate signifying practices. As Kohn<sup>9</sup> wrote: “Life is constitutively semiotic.”

At the same time, arguably, animals cannot construct discourses, at least not in the way that the concept of discourse is defined in this essay. One could argue that individual humans cannot produce discourses, as the construction of meaning at this level is a social and not an individual process either, even if individuals can identify with particular discourses, and can construct their subjectivity through these discourses. The absence of animals – not to mention other living beings, and abiotic matter – from the realm of discursive production (and from institutions, the signifying machines that often transform signifying practices into discourses), generates a structural power imbalance that is hard to remedy, and is one of the key causes of the domination of the nonhuman world by humans.

One more – crucial – element still needs to be added to this equation, namely the

<sup>3</sup> J. Corbett, *Communicating Nature: How We Create and Understand Environmental Messages*, Washington-Covelo-London: Island Press, 2006, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Stibbe’s analysis, or any other academic reflection, is of course not outside these discursive struggles.

<sup>5</sup> A. Stibbe, *Animals Erased: Discourse, Ecology, and Reconnection with the Natural World*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012, 3.

<sup>6</sup> C. Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, 1.

<sup>7</sup> J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 41.

<sup>8</sup> S. Hall, “The Work of Representation”, in Id., ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage, 1997, 13-64.

<sup>9</sup> E. Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*, Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013, 9.

material. As I have extensively argued elsewhere<sup>10</sup> the material is not a second-rate component of social reality. In contrast, the material has to be approached as an integrated and substantial part of social reality, intimately knotted and entangled, and in permanent interaction with the discursive. As new materialist approaches argue, the material has its own agencies. Barad's<sup>11</sup> re-conceptualisation of agency illustrates this argument: "Agency is not held, it is not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements". This material agency affects the power positions of nonhuman animals, who through their bodily practices can at least recalibrate their power relations to compensate for what they are denied in the discursive realm. But also the abiotic parts of the world can exercise agency, with, for instance, the soil trembling and moving.

## 2. UNSILENCING NATURE

The inability of nonhuman living beings to produce discourse, despite their ability to produce signifying practices, generates tactical questions, very much in de Certeau's<sup>12</sup> meaning of the word 'tactics', as resisting hegemony. These questions, and some of their answers, are (arguably) not different from the discussions on the subaltern in postcolonial theory, where Spivak<sup>13</sup> argued that the "irretrievably heterogeneous" subaltern cannot not speak. Obviously, the subaltern can produce signifying practices, but the difficulty lies in the transformation of these signifying practices into discourse. Interestingly enough, also one of the key answers to this conundrum is produced in postcolonial theory, through Said's<sup>14</sup> emphasis on *writing back*, a tactical replacement of dominant imperial narratives "with either a more playful or a more powerful new narrative style".

The silencing of nonhuman living beings is at least as intense. It is, though, not helped by their inability to produce discourses. In some cases – obviously with some painful similarities to the cruel treatments that colonial subjects were exposed to – the silencing has been literal and physical. For instance, nonhuman predators, especially when they entered in competition with humans over territory and resources, were often subjected to a species-cide. But also symbolic violence has been extensively used towards nonhuman living beings (see, for instance, Robisch<sup>15</sup> for a discussion on wolves).

This sometimes structurally oppressive and violent relation between human and nonhuman living beings is not easy to remedy. Said's tactics of writing back are, for instance, not something that can immediately be transferred to this context. Of course, nonhuman living beings have – through their material bodily practices and through their signifying practices (even though humans not always comprehend these) – resisted the attempts of humans to dominate them. But in addition, different (human) voices have

<sup>10</sup> N. Carpentier, *The Discursive-Material Knot: Cyprus in Conflict and Community Media Participation*, New York: Peter Lang, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> K. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2007, 54.

<sup>12</sup> M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by S. Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

<sup>13</sup> G.C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in C. Nelson, L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana-Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988, 271-313 (284).

<sup>14</sup> E.W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, 1994, 260, emphasis in original.

<sup>15</sup> S.K. Robisch, *Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature*, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2009.

been writing back to these oppressive practices towards nonhuman living beings, defending the interest of nonhuman living beings and nature in general. Literature, science, popular culture have all entered in this discursive struggle, in a variety of ways, with the animal takeover fantasy as one of many examples. For instance, the apes in the *Planet of the Apes* and the mice in the *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* are shown to exercise political power, through their resistance against, and eventual domination over, humans. Environmental movements and activism have been, for decades and more, countering the silencing of nature, resulting in a variety of political translations of these discourses. For instance, animal rights have been engrained in legal frameworks, which institutionalizes these representational logics, a practice that has been extended to non-living components of nature, with, for instance, rivers having been granted legal rights (see Kang<sup>16</sup> for a discussion). These tactics share the principle that nature is unsilenced, transforming signifying practices that empathically speak on behalf of, and that defend the interest of nature, into discourse.

This practice of representation – in its political meaning, as “speaking on behalf of” – that then produces representations – in its cultural meaning, as in “making present” – is nevertheless highly complicated and potentially problematic, as humans unavoidably find themselves in the position of being a steward and representative on behalf of nature. Part of the answer to this dilemma lies in the acknowledgment that there are no better alternatives available, and the laissez-faire attitudes of the past have more contributed to the problem than to its solution. The risk that this type of stewardship escalates into an equally problematic anthropocentric position, still needs to be acknowledged, though, and countered by a non-hierarchical and respectful sense of responsibility and an ethics of care. Another part of the answer lies in the unpacking of the concept of political representation, where democratic theory can provide some solace. Even when the counter-balancing force of participation is virtually absent, democratic theory allows us to think about post-election situations, where political decision-making powers have been delegated to a select few, and are expected<sup>17</sup> to be wielded with responsibility and empathy<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, the logics of empowerment, which aims to reconfigure power imbalances, has a – slightly hidden – collaborative component, where those in strong power positions actively contribute to the equalisation of power relations, knowing that what Pateman<sup>19</sup> called full participation is impossible to achieve on a permanent and global scale. In this imperfect setting, empowerment still remains desirable and necessary; a dynamics that allows us to also better appreciate the unsilencing of nature tactics.

### 3. PARTICIPATORY TACTICS OF UNSILENCING NATURE: THE *LYSSNA!* WORKSHOPS

The need to actively counter the still hegemonic anthropocentric discourse(s) can be translated in a variety of tactics. One translation is the Silencing/Unsilencing Nature

<sup>16</sup> K. Kang, “On the Problem of the Justification of River Rights”, *Water International*, 44, 6-7 (2019): 667-683. DOI: 10.1080/02508060.2019.1643523.

<sup>17</sup> In practice, this might not always be the case.

<sup>18</sup> M.E. Morrell, *Empathy and Democracy: Feeling, Thinking, and Deliberation*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> C. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

(SUN) project, which was developed within the framework of the larger *Lyssna!* project, a collaboration between three Swedish arts centres: Färgfabriken, Skellefteå Konsthall and Virserum Konsthall. *Lyssna!* consists out of the creation of “a forum where young people, researchers, and artists can explore and relay their experiences and feelings in relation to climate and places”<sup>20</sup>. Selected by the arts centres, small groups of youngsters, aged between 15 and 21 years, team up with artists and scholars, for a variety of activities.

One of these activities was the SUN project, with, inspired by the theoretical reflections on the construction of nature and unsilencing tactics – discussed in this article – and by participatory photography, and methods like photovoice, “the combination of participant created photographs and narratives”<sup>21</sup>, SUN aims to facilitate and support youngsters to produce a photography exhibition and catalogue, with photographic signifying practices that actively unsilence nature. While the original plan was for the author of this article to organise an on-site SUN workshop, the Covid-19-related travel restrictions led to the development of an educational package that could autonomously deployed by the arts centre collaborators and teams of youngsters. Structured by a detailed, 40-pages script<sup>22</sup>, the package consisted of an introduction, four theoretical video-essays (supported by a series of exercises), two assignment videos that described the procedure (from topic selection to photography exhibition), and a conclusion.

On 10 October 2020, the *Lyssna!* team organised three parallel SUN workshops, at three locations: Färgfabriken organised a workshop in the Swedish capital Stockholm, Virserums Konsthall in the south of Sweden and Skellefteå Konsthall in the north of the country. In the case of the Färgfabriken workshop, on which I will focus here<sup>23</sup>, the 10 youngsters and the *Lyssna!* staff decided to focus on the tension between grass and weed (in Swedish: ‘gräs’ and ‘ogräs’), and to act as the stewards of weeds.

This resulted in a series of 24 photographs. A key topic of the photos was the symbolisation of (the materiality) of the discursive classification between grass and weed. Also the weeds’ agency and resilience became a main topic in the group’s work. For instance, one of the photos captured the discursive dichotomisation – between legitimate and illegitimate plants – by focusing on a fence that demarcated a football pitch, with well-disciplined grass. The pitch is aggressively protected by human intervention, where intruding weeds become destroyed by fire. Theo’s photograph shows the failure of this strategy and again the material agency of these plants, with the following titles being added: “We will grow back again” and “You will not get rid of us, haha!”

<sup>20</sup> <https://fargfabriken.se/en/right-now/item/1471-listen>.

<sup>21</sup> M. Jarldorn, *Photovoice Handbook for Social Workers: Method, Practicalities and Possibilities for Social Change*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 1.

<sup>22</sup> The script allows for quite some openness, to deal with always different local circumstances.

<sup>23</sup> The material of this workshop became available for analysis first.

Figure 1 - *Photograph by Theo – Färgfabriken Lyssna! workshop – 10 October 2020*



One of Selma's photos is entitled "In the cracks we thread!" It shows the growth of moss in the asphalt of a road, again showing the resistance and agency of weeds. Her accompanying text critiques the discourse of dichotomisation, and sides with the weed, by calling upon them to continue their resistant growth.

Figure 2 - *Photograph and text by Selma – Färgfabriken Lyssna! workshop – 10 October 2020*

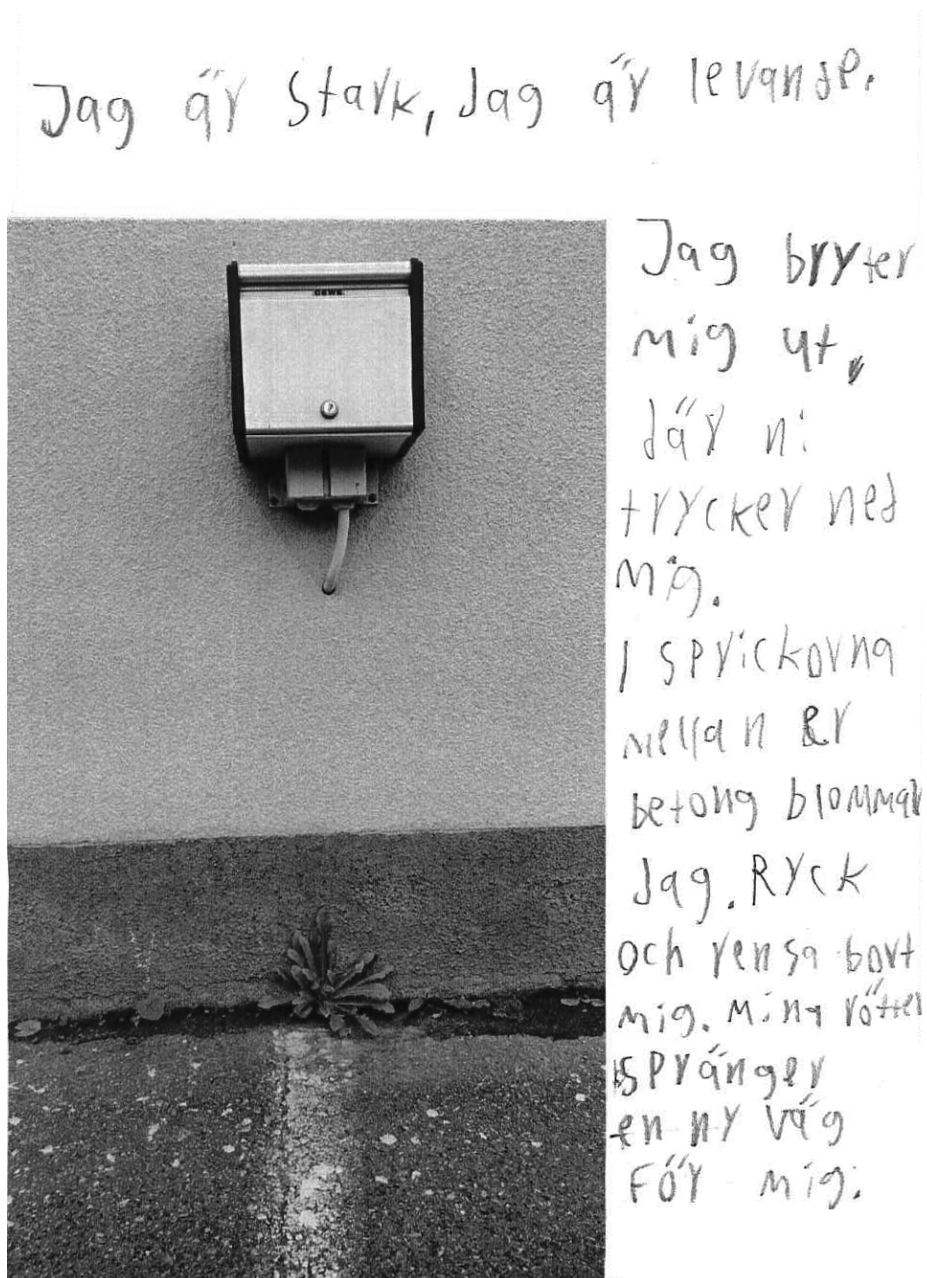


“‘Weeds’, what exactly are weeds and what is grass? Our definition of right or wrong is not black and white. Everything is a grayscale and we thrive in this grayscale, the cracks in the ground, the earth, society. So dare to grow, grow where shapes crack, because in the cracks we thrive”.

Finally, Joel’s work expresses the respect for the resilience and adaptability of weeds, with the following text accompanying his photo of a wallflower:

“I’m strong, I’m alive. I break out where you push me down. In the cracks between your concrete I bloomed. Jerk me out and clear me away. My roots are blowing a new path for me”.

Figure 3 - Photograph and text by Joel – Färgfabriken Lyssna! workshop –  
10 October 2020





Joel's barrel photo and the accompanying text are expressions of respect for the resilience and adaptability of these plants. Not only does this photo signify a celebration of these plants' capacities, but it is also a disruption of the discourse of hierarchisation that devalues these plants, and a critique on human's destructive ('toxic') strategies towards nature.

Figure 4 - *Photograph by Joel – Färgfabriken Lyssna! workshop – 10 October 2020*



“A barrel that once contained the chemicals, hazardous for nature. Now ‘weeds’ are growing there. Isn’t it a bit nasty to call these viable and adaptable plants ‘weeds’. To pull them away and clear them away. They are the only ones that were adaptable enough to grow in such a toxic environment”.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The *Lyssna!* workshops were experiments – theorised by the logic of discursive-material entanglement – with the objective to generate a series of (photographic) signifying practices that actively strengthened several counter-hegemonic discourses, through the representation of the weeds’ material agency. First, the (discourse on the) silence of nature was disrupted, by having youngsters act as stewards of nonhuman living beings. Even if these forms of (political) representation are not straightforward and the surfacing of perverse effects is a genuine risk, the participants’ signifying practices produced a shift in positionality, having them empathically speak from the position and interest of, these plants. In particular, their voices echoed the interest of weed and its right to flourish.

Second, these photographs also deconstructed speciesism, and the hierarchies that humans create within the nonhuman world. The photographs constituted a revalidation of a series of delegitimised species, demonstrating its resilience, adaptability and diversity. Through the emphasis on the plants’ material agency, the photographs demonstrated that these plants can act and can resist the oppressive human practices they are subjected to. In this sense, the youngsters amplified the plants’ material voice, and acknowledged its existence

Finally, the participatory dimension of the project countered yet another hegemonic discourse, namely the elitist discourse that youngsters can only enter the artistic field as spectator or student. Even if the project had a strong educational component – teaching these youngsters about nonhuman positionality – it also allowed them to work with representatives of the artistic field, and to produce photographic work which had clear aesthetic value. Their contribution to this article – in a special issue on arts-based research – is equally important, as their photographs speak loudly and clearly. Moreover, even if the weeds could not participate directly in this process, also their (mediated) voice and agency became respectfully represented into the artistic field, balancing somewhere on the edge between representation and (indirect) participation.

*Acknowledgement*

The SUN project is supported by Mistra, the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research, through the research programme Mistra Environmental Communication, and has been developed by Nico Carpentier in collaboration with Färgfabriken, Skellefteå Konsthall and Virserum Konsthall. Special thanks to Daniel Urey of Färgfabriken.