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# Bamboo Time

## A Metaphor for Humanity

Von: Avril Tynan



Image 1: “Bamboo” by [Arneliese](#) (CC)

Wherever anything lives, there is, open  
somewhere, a register in which time is being  
inscribed.

Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*

In July 2022 and as part of the ColloKWlum series, Dr Isabel Kranz from the University of Vienna presented the outline to her forthcoming book, co-edited with Joela Jacobs and titled *Pflanzen: Kulturwissenschaftliches Handbuch*. Interrogating the nature/culture divide, the book explores the role of plants in the origins and development of cultural thought and practice. Kranz’s presentation illustrated a number of the core themes and challenges posed by the book and by contemporary approaches to plants in Western culture, including the centrality of flowers in discussions of plants, the conflation or estrangement between different parts of a plant as a simultaneously singular and plural organism, and the Goethean assumption of continuous or infinite growth epitomized by the endless budding of new leaves on a tree.

As discussion moved towards the metaphorical function of plants in literature and culture, I was struck by the role of time and particularly of cyclical time in plant life. Michel Onfray’s description of floral time as “cyclical”<sup>1</sup> resonates across botanical discourses. Cyclical time is characteristic of the recurrence of perennials which die down according to the seasons and then return each year from their roots. Yet floral time also attends to the properties of annual and biennial plants which flower or fruit before they die, leaving

behind seeds to yield the next generation the following year. There is something eternally optimistic in the envisioning of plant time as cyclical, something which offers hope in the certainty of an eternal return.

In “The Metamorphosis of Plants,” a poem proceeding a longer contemplation on the role of repetition in the reproduction of plant life under the same title, Goethe intimates how the plant as a rhetorical trope for human life conveys our convictions of continuity and permanency. Poetically charting the life cycle of the plant, he demonstrates both the Hegelian potentiality of plant productivity carried in the ordinary seed and the future (re)growth of the plant as it reaches maturation in the production of flowers or fruits:

Asleep within the seed the power lies,  
Foreshadowed pattern, folded in the shell,  
Root, leaf, and germ, pale and half-formed.  
[...]  
Deep in the bosom of the swelling fruit  
A germ begins to burgeon here and there,  
As nature welds her ring of ageless power,  
Joining another cycle to the last,  
Flinging the chain unto the end of time—  
The whole reflected in each separate part.<sup>2</sup>

Goethe shows how the plant is always more than itself, other than itself, caught up in an eternal metamorphosis, a “process of becoming-other”.<sup>3</sup> The plant thus always already contains future potentialities, a means of return, a means of survival. The seed, for example, contains the plant’s as-yet unrealised potential that, as Michael Marder writes in *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, “necessitates a transition from the potential to the actual, from the abstract to the concrete, from the merely implicit to the fully elaborated”.<sup>4</sup> The seed thus enrobes both a present and a future that is still to come: “a mature plant, which has not yet developed by means of the qualitative articulations of growth, is the seed as its own not yet actualized potentiality”.<sup>5</sup> This “infinite growth, immoderately aspiring toward the other” has, as Marder notes, “neither a beginning nor an end”.<sup>6</sup>

Yet I am troubled by the instrumental positivity captured in the notions of cyclical time and of the eternal return of plant life without end. As a metaphor for human life, this reproducibility ensures that we continue to think of humanity and of human beings as enduring, as persisting despite the complexities and challenges of internal and external threat, disease, and death. This is of course not to conflate human and plant time; Marder has already noted the ways in which the Heideggerian temporality of human life is not cyclical but shaped by the invariable knowledge of approaching death and the unfulfillment of our open-ended possibilities in the world.<sup>7</sup> Yet with the proliferation of plant metaphors in culture, it seems apt to interrogate the potential interpretations elicited by vegetal metaphors. Indeed, in a global society emerging from the recent pandemic and stagnating under the realities of climate catastrophe, a cyclical model of humanity seems recklessly optimistic if not unequivocally injudicious.

During Kranz's talk I was reminded of a novel I recently read by one of France's best-selling novelists, Gilles Legardinier, in which humanity finds a vegetal metaphor far opposed to the regenerative temporality and physiology of the Goethean leaf. In *Nous étions les hommes*, a thriller set in modern-day Edinburgh and published in 2011, bamboo takes on the rhetoric of linearity and impending devastation to illustrate how humanity may be approaching an end from which nothing can survive to propagate future generations. Although I originally discovered this novel through my own research on dementia and Alzheimer's disease in francophone literature, and have previously written about the problematic parallels raised in the novel between dementia and the language of epidemics,<sup>8</sup> Kranz's presentation of plants and flowers in cultural studies reminded me of the strong connections drawn in the novel between a particularly exceptional pattern of plant temporality that may act as a powerful metaphor in works that portray the downfall of humanity and the extinction of the species.

*Nous étions les hommes* gives the following description on the back cover:

C'est l'une des plus fascinantes énigmes qui soit. Sur notre planète, il existe plus de 1800 espèces de bambous. Chaque fois que l'une d'elles fleurit, tous ses spécimens, où qu'ils se trouvent sur Terre, le font exactement au même moment. Ensuite, l'espèce meurt. Personne ne sait expliquer ce chant du cygne, ni l'empêcher. Aujourd'hui, l'homme va peut-être connaître le même sort. Arrivé lui aussi à son apogée, il risque de disparaître...<sup>9</sup>

[It is one of the most fascinating enigmas there ever was. On our planet exist more than 1800 species of bamboo. Each time one species flowers, all of the plants, wherever they are on Earth, flower at exactly the same moment. After that, the species dies. No one knows how to explain this swan song, nor to prevent it. Today, humankind will perhaps meet the same fate. Arrived at its peak, humanity is in danger of disappearing.]

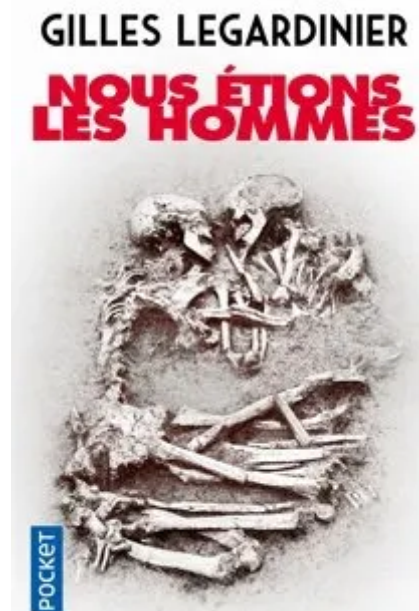


Image 2: Book cover "*Nous étions les hommes*". (CC)

Although this enigma is overtly employed in the novel to suggest that Alzheimer's disease may one day affect the whole of the human race, it has a more radical latent power to destabilise the common assumptions between regeneration, rejuvenation, and return in the plant world. Bamboo, a fast-growing woody grass native to tropical and sub-tropical regions of Asia, Africa, South America, North America, and Australia provides food, shelter, and tools for nearly half the world's population. Typically characterised by a rhizomatic structure that connects all non-clumping species together beneath the surface of the earth, bamboo lends itself to imageries of interconnection, perseverance, and multiplication. Yet it contains within it a mysterious and controversial characteristic that limits this ideal of continuity and implies instead the infiltration of finitude and expiration.

Most species of bamboo are monocarpic, meaning that they flower and produce seed only once in their lifetime. This semelparity is not unique to the bamboo but it is further accompanied, in most species, by the subsequent death of the plant, leaving behind only one possibility for renewal via seeds and devastating landscapes and ecosystems in its wake. As Robert Austin and Koichiro Ueda argue in *Bamboo*:

Bamboo, it seems, can overcome almost any kind of hardship. With its far-ranging network of growth beneath the ground, all shoots are linked together and nourish each other and propagate apparently without end – without end, that is, until bamboo flowers. This coming into flower of bamboo represents the swan song of its existence.<sup>10</sup>



Image 3: “Flowering Bamboo” by [Ajinkya Gadave](#) (CC)

Although some species of bamboo do flower annually, most bamboo flower ‘gregariously’, that is, as David Farrelly writes:

Crowds of plants within groves, in crowds of groves stretched across continents, if connected genetically – alerted by some unriddled mechanism in the cells, some clock or calendar that dates the age of the genetic stock – hundreds then thousands, then hundreds of thousands of plants suddenly stop making culms and rhizomes and start making tiny flowers, as inconspicuous, individually, as they are rare.<sup>11</sup>

After such gregarious flowering cycles, the bamboo almost always dies, creating “a dramatic shift in the forest ecology” and, particularly if arriving unexpectedly, devastating economic and social systems.<sup>12</sup> As yet, many external triggers have been posed for the origins and reasons for gregarious bamboo flowering, including “predator satiation, parental competition, drought, sunspots, earthquakes, and other environmental factors” such as stress, but none has yet been proven to reliably bring on the flowering of the bamboo.<sup>13</sup>

In *Nous étions les hommes* seemingly healthy, often young individuals are struck down by “une sorte d’Alzheimer foudroyant” [a sort of sudden and severe Alzheimer’s]<sup>14</sup> characterised by a “basculément” [tipping point] that triggers the loss of “toute ses facultés cognitives” [all their cognitive faculties].<sup>15</sup> In line with the images associated with dementia and Alzheimer’s disease in cultural discourses, the subject’s loss of communication, loss of memory, disorientation, and aggression are exacerbated by the intensity and simultaneity of the onset of the disease that drains individuals of their humanity, reducing them to empty shells of their former selves in the case of older patients<sup>16</sup> and to vicious animals in younger patients.<sup>17</sup>

As it is explored in the novel, this bizarre phenomenon affecting individuals all around the world is both seemingly isolated and profoundly interlinked: despite differences in age, gender, health, and even the geographical location of those affected, the disease incites similar losses and damages. In connection with the metaphor of the gregarious bamboo, the novel highlights that the disease has no external trigger but must come from within, latent and embedded within the human being: “Rien d’extérieur ne nous attaque... L’ennemi est en nous” [Nothing external is attacking us... The enemy is inside us].<sup>18</sup> Just as the bamboo will reach a tipping point when it both flowers and sets off the physiological reaction that presages its own death, so humanity too may have reached its peak, attaining the height of development at the price of existence.

As I thought back to this particular form of plant time, it occurred to me that monocarpic bamboo perform a particular function in cultural representations of humanity that differs vastly from the permanence shown by perennials or even the predictability offered by annuals. Certainly, in the erratic life cycle of the monocarpic bamboo seeds are produced which may go on to yield future generations of the same species, but in Legardinier’s novel, the rhetoric of bamboo flowering resonates with the constant warnings that often pass unheard in everyday life alerting humankind to the reality that they are not infallible, immovable, and immortal. On the contrary, humanity may have reached, or even passed, a peak that spells its inevitable demise.

Yet *Nous étions les hommes* aims to end on a positive note that reiterates the connections between all human beings at the same time as it emphasises our possibilities for metamorphosis, not only in the Goethean sense that saw future (re)iterations of the subject in ever changing forms but also as agents of change. As the novel contends: “les bambous seront toujours victimes de leur malédiction, mais... nous avons une chance de ne pas finir comme eux” [bamboo will always fall victim to their affliction, but... we have a chance to not end up like them].<sup>19</sup>

Bamboo time evokes a linearity that is incompatible with the cyclical temporality of traditional plant time. As a cultural metaphor, however, it offers a potentially more realistic foundation for thinking about the ways in which humanity and the environment are entangled. Thinking of bamboo time as a metaphor for humanity is a reminder that our actions today may not constitute part of a future return but rather spell out the arrival of demise and destruction.

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17. See Legardinier, pp. 15–17; pp. 97–102.
18. Legardinier, p. 81.
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SUGGESTED CITATION: Tynan, Avril: Bamboo Time. A Metaphor for Humanity, in: KWI-BLOG, [<https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/bamboo-time/>], 24.10.2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37189/kwi-blog/20221024-0830>

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**DOI:** 10.37189/kwi-blog/20221024-0830

**URN:** urn:nbn:de:hbz:465-20221024-101257-1

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