

On Trees: Protest between the Symbolic and the Material

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Once there was a tree, and she loved a little boy.
And every day the boy would come and he would gather her leaves.
And make them into crowns and play king of the forest.
He would climb up her trunk and swing from her branches. And eat apples.
And they would play hide and go seek.
And when he was tired, he would sleep in her shade. And the boy loved the tree –
very much.
And the tree was happy.
(Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree*)

Introduction

This paper is about trees. About the trees in the “Schlossgarten” – the castle garden – in the city of Stuttgart, Germany, and how they have shaped the protest against the remodeling of Stuttgart’s main station. Thereby this paper also aims to establish a linkage of two terms and concepts: materiality and argumentation. It starts from the assumption that the role of “things” in argumentation and their relation to symbolic action are worth exploring. The interest in the materiality *of* communication and the materiality *in* communication has been growing in the last twenty to thirty years. One of the cornerstones of this interest is marked by a book edited by Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer (1988) with exactly this title: *Materiality of Communication*. The chapters of that volume circle around the material aspects of media that enable communication. Many of them stress the surface – aspects of communication, which do not necessarily refer to some deeper meaning, but rather function through (bodily) perception and experience. Gumbrecht, for instance, in his chapter (1988) already hints at his later theory of presence by

formulating a tension between the rhythm (open to bodily experience) and the meaning of texts. The underlying assumption when discussing the materiality of communication is that it determines not only how something can be communicated but what can be communicated. A public park allows for other means today, with a combination of mobile, internet-based means of communication and ‘traditional’ paper-based forms like leaflets and posters, than it did twenty years ago. At the same time, a park still allows for entirely different forms of symbolic action than a parliament.

What I am interested in moves one step further and relates to work in the rhetoric of protest: how non-discursive entities – things – influence discourse, frame argumentation and thereby function rhetorically. This is somewhat in line with the actor-network theory as put forward by Latour (2005). He suggests describing practices while refraining from prior strong conceptions of human action. Rather, the researcher should stay open and describe the center of agency, and this center can be human as well as non-human. Latour applies the term “actor” also to non-human agents. However, when he applies the term “actor,” the concept of “acting” is quite different from that in a strong human-action paradigm. As Latour puts it, “an ‘actor’ in the hyphenated expression actor-network is not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it” and “to use the word ‘actor’ means that it’s never clear who and what is acting when we act since an actor on stage is never alone in acting” (2005, p. 46). It is in this sense that I am interested in the entanglement of different things and humans acting rhetorically. It might prove fruitful to conceive of the things – in this case the trees – not only as something that is being acted upon, but as things which themselves have agency. So the questions addressed in this essay are: How is the materiality of the specific trees incorporated in the protest? What kind of protest practices are the trees subjected to? How are the trees acted upon by the protesters? How could the trees in the Schlossgarten become such a strong and central argument theme? And also: what can a case study of the Stuttgart protests show about the status of “things” and their materiality for public discourse?

This focus is grounded in my interest in public discourse as a process between different participants/citizens and in my interest in the significance of rhetoric for a democratic society. As Kock and Villadsen put it: “Rhetoric is at the core of being a citizen” (2012, p. 5). The focus on processes rather than products of rhetorical action allows for *how* questions rather than *why*

questions: how do participants take part in public discourse, how do they enact rhetorical citizenship? This then includes taking into account not only traditional rhetorical means (speeches and debates) but all forms employed by citizens performing citizenship. Asen stresses this notion of multimodality when he writes: “In drawing attention to the citizenship as a process, a discourse theory recognizes the fluid, multimodal, and quotidian enactments in a multiple public sphere” (2004, p. 191).

Before moving to the method section and my analysis, let me first set the scene by briefly describing the history of the protest movement against the remodeling of the train station. In 1995 the German federal railways, the federal government, the *Land* of Baden-Württemberg and the city of Stuttgart agreed on the project to remodel Stuttgart’s main station and turn it from an over-ground dead-end into an underground through-station. This project has become known as Stuttgart 21 or just S21. From the beginning several environmentalist groups questioned the project for a variety of different reasons: among them cost, threat to the ground water (Stuttgart has mineral water springs), logistics, and the threat to the “Schlossgarten.” This protest stayed within smaller circles. It existed, but was neither heard nor seen much publicly. Then in 2007 more than 60,000 citizens of Stuttgart moved for a public referendum about Stuttgart 21. The motion was dismissed by the majority of the city council.

In 2010 the beginning of the visible construction work drew closer, including the demolition of one part – the North wing – of the station building. Under the heading of the slogan “stay up” (*oben bleiben*) a form of public protest arose that Stuttgart had never encountered before. Since then Stuttgart has seen “Monday rallies” every week – ranging from a couple of hundreds of participants to 100,000. The label “Monday protests” was not chosen by chance: since the revolution in the former GDR, instigated by the “Monday protests” in Leipzig, among others, this label has been used by rallies that mean to place themselves in line with an oppressed people against an, at best, disengaged government. Then in July 2010, a steady picket was established in the Schlossgarten by the protesters, trees were occupied and some tree houses built.

On September 30, 2010 thousands of citizens, mainly high school students, rallied against the felling of 250 trees in the Schlossgarten. The police answered with pepper spray and water cannons. These means were widely perceived as too harsh and inappropriate. In a legendary TV-news interview anchor Marietta Slomka interrupted the Minister of the Interior, as

he described and justified the police action, with the question: “Are you now actually talking about the Swabian citizenry? It sounds like you are talking about a war zone” (“Reden Sie denn jetzt über das schwäbische Bürgertum? Das hört sich an, als würden Sie über den Krieg berichten”). This quote puts in a nutshell the controversy that accompanied the S21 protests: what does it mean to be a good citizen? How should citizenship be enacted? On October 1 between 50,000 and 100,000 protesters rallied against Stuttgart 21. September 30 gave rise to an even stronger protest movement. The Schlossgarten at that time was an assemblage of tents, occupied trees, information booths, the picket, percussion groups, and overall a very lively, colorful crowd. The protests had altered the face of the city, and a specific mode of involvement, a specific mode of “being a citizen” (see Asen 2004, 195) had been introduced. And this way of being a citizen was not orderly, but loud and colorful, representing in some ways the “rowdiness” that Ivie (2002) identifies as central to rhetorical deliberation (see p. 279), although rowdiness might be too strong a term. At the same time the government of Baden-Württemberg initiated an arbitration procedure, which led to few results and only minor changes in the project. In 2012, already under the newly elected Green/Social Democrat administration, the majority of citizens in Baden-Württemberg (and in Stuttgart) voted for the continuation of the project. Shortly after that, 250 more trees were felled in the “Schlossgarten.”

What struck me when looking more closely at the argumentative strategies of proponents, and especially opponents, was the motif of the tree. This motif in itself is not unusual in this kind of protest. The tree is an emblem often featured in environmentalists’ discourse and protest, and it is a topos often taken up in arguments about “green” themes. What struck me in the protest against S21 was that it did not only take up the prominent topos of a tree discursively, but that the protestors’ argumentation was inextricably bound to the concrete, particular trees. One could probably argue that the trees themselves protested, had agency in the protest. In this paper I want to offer an analysis of the S21 controversy by following a theme and a materiality through the discourse. I shall first lay out my method and then analyze how “the tree” as an argument and a materiality functioned during the controversy. Finally, I will tie this analysis to the discussion on materiality and discourse. I will argue that one cannot grasp the impact of the argumentation when taking it into account only as discursive entities, but that discourse and materiality are interwoven.

Method

This analysis performs a form of argumentation analysis that is informed by my interest in the development or career of argument themes: how do arguments develop over time in a specific discourse, how are they employed, how do they fail? So my interest is not in the argument as a product but rather as a becoming, as something that is in flux while it is employed in the discourse and itself influences the discourse it enables. In an earlier project on the career of statements in criminal cases this included following the career of arguments through different materialities: files, informal chats, lawyer-client conferences and trials.¹ For the current project on trees, I mainly relied on websites, info brochures, interviews, field notes and the trees themselves.

This interest is informed by ethnographic work – although in itself it does not represent “real” ethnographic work. As Endres and Senda-Cook (2011) argue, the rhetorical impact of “place” as a materiality can best be grasped when experiencing it, when “being there” is part of the research, as it allows one to access participant categories. This hints at an ethnographic approach where participant observation, or rather participating observation, is key. At the same time it needs to be accompanied by the alienation of that which is being seen, heard, experienced. As Ammann and Hirschauer stress, “ethnography is in some ways about, after having understood something, being even more astonished by it. Familiarity is not a goal, but a point that always needs to be overcome anew” (1997, p. 29).²

Focusing on the intertwinement of the material and the symbolic also invites what Marcus (1995) called “multisited ethnography.” This approach answers the conditions of modern life, being held in a tension between the local and the global, as well as the attention to the ethnography of one’s own culture, by suggesting that one not focus on a single, specially circumscribed field, but rather follow something (the people, the thing, the metaphor, the story, the conflict, the life) through discourse, practice, culture (Marcus 1995, p. 106) in order to be able to produce and appropriate analysis and thick description of cultural phenomena. In my analysis I am following two entities: the theme of the tree in the S21 controversy seen through the discourse, and the actual trees in Stuttgart. Two entities that, although distinguishable from each other, are intertwined at the same time. The underlying

¹ See for example Scheffer, Hannken-Illjes and Kozin (2010).

² Translation my own.

assumption here is that following the trees will also show how arguments and their premises are being produced. My interest is not so much in a single snapshot of an argument as product, but rather in the becoming of arguments. As Latour put it, “we are going from final products to production, from ‘cold’ stable objects to ‘warmer’ and unstable ones” (2005, p. 21). Thus this work is a hint at an ethnography of argumentation, as has been advocated by Prior (2005). Prior has asked argumentation studies “to give the diagrams a bit of a rest and consider seriously the implications of seeing argumentation as sociohistoric practice, to ask how pedagogies can help attune students to the work of appropriating situated knowledge practices, to open up the ethnography of argumentation as a branch of the larger ethnography of communication” (Prior 2005, p. 133). This includes focussing not so much on the premises and the inferential relationships between them but rather on the way these premises are constructed and become available. But note again: my approach and analysis in this research are not ethnographic, they rather borrow insights and concepts from ethnography to conduct a rhetorical analysis (and in certain ways an argumentation analysis). By doing so I mean to suggest that taking up ethnography in argumentation analysis would be extremely fruitful.³

As my starting point I utilized different forms of data: the website and the activities by a group called “die Parkschützer” (the park guardians) and “die Baumpaten” (the Godparents of trees), interviews with protestors and my notes. With all this, I followed the trees.

Trees

The tree is a central metaphor and material topos. It stands for knowledge, for life, for duration, for shelter. A vast number of literary works centering around childhood speak of trees – trees that protect, that become witnesses, become friends. It is not by accident that trees in *The Lord of the Rings* are the oldest creatures and among the most powerful. I would need an extra

³ My reluctance to position this work more clearly in the ethnographic strand is twofold: most importantly, I started to work on this project after the trees were gone, so although I have experienced the protest in the Schlossgarten, I have not done so as a researcher. Also, this project stands currently at the beginning. I am still continuing to gather data, mainly from interviews with different activists. So what this paper presents are first outcomes to be supplemented in the future.

essay, if not an extra book, to lay out in what different senses “the tree” bears in different disciplines. Not only the tree in itself, but also the planting of trees can have a strong rhetorical impact. In 1985 Joseph Beuys, a German artist well known for his concept of “the social sculpture” and for the statement that every person is an artist, started his art project “7,000 oaks” at the documenta in Kassel. He framed this project as an act of creation: “... here, there is nothing to hope, or to believe, or to doubt, but here something is being created, that in itself is a creation” (Beuys, Blume and Rappmann 2006, p. 25).

In the Stuttgart protests, the planting of trees was one of the rhetorical practices: well-known protestors planted a “Stuttgart-21-resistance-tree”. This tree became an object of controversy, being attacked by the proponents of S21 and planted anew, resulting in at least three “resistance trees” being planted.

Especially in environmentalists’ discourse and protests the tree is a central theme. The beginning of the environmentalist concern in Germany in the 1970s, for example, was marked by the concern about the “German Forests,” which were threatened by pollution and acid rain. This importance of the motif of the tree is also reflected by the label sometimes used for environmentalists: tree-huggers. This nickname – often pejoratively used – points to another important aspects of the tree as an argument theme:⁴ it oscillates between the botanical and the human. Trees, it seems, are often granted personhood, anthropomorphized. Some statements of the “godparents of trees” in Stuttgart point to this: “A tree is a creature like you and me” (*Ein Baum ist ein Lebewesen wie du und ich*). “The animal, the human, the tree, they all share the same breath” (*Das Tier, der Mensch, der Baum, sie alle teilen denselben Atem*). “Who cuts – kills – a tree is a sinner” (*Wer einen Baum fällt – tötet – ist ein Frevler*).

Looked at from an argumentation point of view, one could argue with Cox (1982) that the tree is here taken as “unique.” Cox introduces uniqueness as one aspect of the topos of the irreparable. This topos he takes from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca “as one of several ‘lines of argument relating to the preferable’” (1982, p. 228). The trees here are depicted as irretrievable once cut down and are thereby anthropomorphized. It also offers an explanation why the argument often brought forward by the proponents – that,

⁴ On the difference of topos and argument theme see Hannken-Illjes (2008).

although 250 trees will have to go, 5,000 will be planted once the construction work is done – fails to persuade the protesters.⁵ They reply that these trees will need a very long time to grow into trees of comparable strength. And something else seems to be at work here: that you cannot just replace a tree with another one, as you cannot just substitute a person for another one.

But I shall stop this line of analysis before it has really started. Conventional arguments employing the theme “tree” can easily be identified in the broader environmentalist discourse as well as in the specific protest against Stuttgart 21 (which is not solely a protest out of environmentalist considerations). Those would include the tree as a habitat: you cannot fell this tree because it gives shelter to insects and mammals. In the case of Stuttgart 21 this argument has been put forward with respect to the hermit beetle, which lived in the trees and is threatened with extinction. Also the trees would be depicted as useful, as they clean the air and provide a resting place. This argument for Stuttgart 21 would take into account the geography of the city, which sits like a cauldron within steep hills, with the park and its trees as a central area to provide the inner city with fresh air. It is not overly surprising that these common arguments can be found in the Stuttgart 21 discourse. Analyzing them could be an interesting and worthwhile undertaking. At the same time, these arguments seem to be interchangeable among various protest sites, had they not been accompanied by references to the concrete trees in the Schlossgarten and the practices that surrounded them. Here the conventional argument themes with their history are coupled with the materiality that can be experienced: a coupling of a general discursive unit with a specific thing that is open to experience.

This coupling and the notion of specificity are represented by many personal narratives, especially by older protesters. It is the theme of these trees as survivors. These trees were protected by the citizens during World War II, when the inner city of Stuttgart was bombed. This is a narrative with a clearly argumentative function that appears in very different forms and functions as one of the leading arguments.⁶ And these trees were left standing during the cold winters (“hunger winters”) just after the Second World

⁵ See open letter by the Parkschützer to the mayor of Stuttgart who wrote in a public letter addressed to two children that although some trees would need to be felled, many more would afterwards be planted. <http://www.parkschuetzer.de/wissenswertes/habensiekinder>

⁶ This was also apparent in one of the interviews with participants of the protest.

War, when the citizens of Stuttgart used pretty much everything they could find as firewood. As one user on the platform of the “Parkschützer” (the park guardians) writes:

Stuttgart’s green lung must not be excavated, otherwise we will all have shortage of breath. Also, the park was given to us by King Wilhelm, who was close to the citizens. Nobody can just take it away from us. In the hard winters of the 40ies in the last century, the freezing people saved this park and did not cut it down. Because it has given them and still gives us a place for recreation and health. Hence: “No excavators in the park!” (“Stuttgarts grüne Lunge darf nicht angebaggert werden, sonst bekommen wir alle Atemnot. Außerdem wurde uns der Park vom bürgernahen König Wilhelm geschenkt. Den Park darf uns niemand einfach wegnehmen. In den harten Wintern der 40er Jahre des vergangenen Jahrhunderts schonten frierende Bürger diesen Park und holzten ihn nicht ab, grade weil er ihnen und uns bis heute zur Erholung und Gesundheit dient. Also Bagger weg vom Park!!!!!!” (roberta penz)).⁷

From a formal point of view, what is employed here is a classical “more or less” topos. At the same time it becomes obvious that this is about specific trees. So I want to shift the focus to those specific trees and how they were acted upon in order to make them meaningful and a part in the protest.

Guarding the guardian

In 2010 and 2011 the “Schlossgarten” was – next to the building of the main station itself – the central place for protest. Here 250 trees were supposed to be felled for preliminary construction work. Starting in the middle of 2010, protesters occupied the “Schlossgarten” and along with it some of the trees. Trees were being decorated, tents were built underneath the trees, the picket had its place among the trees, political and cultural events took place, there was music, there was food. The park was also a place for spiritual practices like prayers and meditations. The “Schlossgarten” and especially its trees became a place for protest and exemplified what Endres and Senda-Cook stated for places of protest in general: “Place is a performer along with activists in making and unmaking the possibilities of protest” (2001, p. 258). The trees were decorated and utilized in quite different ways. One tree had

⁷ <http://www.parkschuetzer.de/php/public.php?page=discussions>, accessed 28.12.2012

so many teddy bears – large and small ones – strung around it that its trunk was barely visible. Others were decorated with teddy bears and political leaflets. One trunk held a large poster, reading “My friend, the tree. This tree must not die and must not fall. Then my heart would go with him.” In the treetops many houses were built and constantly occupied. This image of the occupied tree is one I want to take a closer look at. Here two arguments, two topoi merge that at first sight might appear to be contradictory: the tree as shelter and the tree as in need of protection.

On the one hand there is the tree as a shelter: The occupation makes the notion of the tree as shelter open to experience. Unlike the argument of the habitat, the shelter for the hermit beetle, this shelter can be seen and felt. Anybody could climb into the tree house and experience what it means to be protected by a tree. And many people will probably remember what it meant to climb into a tree as a child and being protected and shielded from view by it. These trees were not *like* shelters, they *were* shelters. These same practices – exhibiting the tree as a shelter – feed into another topos. By making the strength of the trees visible, their vulnerability is stressed at the same time. The trees are at the same time depicted as in need of protection, most clearly in the notion by one group of protesters of the tree as a godchild. This group of protesters called itself “Baumpaten” (tree sponsors or tree godparents). I chose the latter translation because – as also evidenced by the teddy bears – at least some of the protesters related to the trees as to persons, vulnerable persons. Hence being a tree-godparent implied taking responsibility for someone vulnerable and possibly in need of protection. What is striking, again, is that these people were not “like godparents,” they *were* godparents. This is underscored in their vow: “This tree has a godparent. I allow everybody to come to my godtree, to rest in his shade, to meet others there, to celebrate, sing, laugh, sleep, just do what you like. I would enjoy more godparents. I ask everybody to protect my godtree, It is prohibited to cause harm to my godtree.”⁸ (“Dieser Baum hat einen Paten. Ich erlaube jedem, meinen Patenbaum aufzusuchen, sich in seinem Schatten auszuruhen, sich mit anderen dort zu treffen, dort zu feiern, singen, lachen, schlafen, einfach zu tun was gefällt. Ich freue mich über weitere Paten. Ich bitte jeden, meinen Patenbaum nach besten Kräften zu schützen. Es ist verboten meinem Patenbaum Schaden zuzufügen”). This vow establishes a close relation of the individual protester to the individual tree.

⁸ www.baumpaten-schlossgarten.de/?seite=zertifikat, as of 14.01.2013

By means of the specific, material tree, open to experience, two seemingly opposed arguments are integrated: the tree as shelter and the tree as godchild. Something (or someone) who protects is, while protecting, in need of protection. One could argue at this point that the tree functions simply as a non-technical proof in the Aristotelian sense and thereby in itself does not belong to the realm of rhetoric. As Aristotle puts it, those proofs are “not supplied by the speaker but are at the outset” (1980, p. 12). He also says of them that they are used rather than invented. However, the trees are not just employed by rhetors, but rhetors, by granting them personhood and turning them into shelters, act upon them in a way to turn them into actors that cannot be dismissed. It is an essential part of making the trees part of the protest to transform them into actors themselves. This position of the trees in the protest might also explain how the felling of the trees was treated.

In February 2012, 250 trees were cut down in the Schlossgarten. The trees are gone. You can look at what is left: a void – an empty space, a construction site. Thereby a place for protest, the central place of the movement, is gone and the tree as an argument has become unavailable, or rather, publicly invisible. At the same time the trees are still available for the protest, but in a very different form. Many of the trees – that is, their large trunks – have been taken to a forest, close to the city center. Here, in the Feuerbacher forest, I encountered what could be called a public viewing of the deceased and a death watch. I first saw this mourning ritual on a Youtube video,⁹ documenting the whereabouts of the trees and talking about them. When I saw the video, my first impression was that now the protest had become somewhat obscure. Sanctuary lamps could be seen in the trees, the faces of the people on the videos were those of mourners. But when I went to the forest to look at this myself, my impression changed somewhat: there was a sign above the trees, stating that these were cut down in the Schlossgarten. I first went there around Christmas, and although there were no candles, the trees were decorated with stars made of straw. One could even argue that they still demanded attention, that they could not “just be dismissed” by the protesters. What they demanded was a form of burial and mourning. This was certainly no form of protest that

⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syciS9-ItJ4> (last access 05.07.2013), also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAcFoOtELTs> (last access 05.07.2013)

was directed towards other people, but it seemed to function for the protest movement as a form of internal identification work – a view also voiced by several protesters themselves.

Conclusion

In this analysis I have tried to show how the materiality of the trees in the Schlossgarten fed into the protest against Stuttgart 21, and how the material is related to the symbolic. Not only is the tree material and a “thing” acted upon, it even in a way becomes an actor of the protest itself. This is due to strategies of anthropomorphization – especially in evidence in the discursive and topical power of the tree and in the way the trees become a central locus of protest practices, discursive as well as material. The trees were taken up in their specificity in different ways: through personal narratives of the Schlossgarten and its history, by decorating them with political as well with personal items, and, not least, by inhabiting them and making them the very place of protest. All these ways of acting upon the trees used the experienceable materiality of the tree: the wood, which holds posters and tree houses, gives shelter, can be touched, smelled, leaned against. At the same time these ways of integrating the trees into the protest relate to the strength the tree has as a topos in very different discourses. Here the material and the symbolic are bound together and refer to one another. This interaction of a strong topos with the material trees that allowed for a wide range of practices could also explain its potency: the trees were common and specific enough to integrate very different forms of protest and political beliefs. Thereby “the trees” opened the protest up to a wider public and offered a form of common ground with personal experience attached to it. Thus they also offered a space for those protesters who usually would not take part in a public protest.

In this way the case of the S21 protests illustrates what the concept of rhetorical citizenship refers to: the focus on the enactment of citizenship and its rhetorical processes and forms. The S21 protests show that – and how – citizenship is not only a status but at the same time needs to be performed, to be enacted. The S21 protests achieved a broad mobilization of citizens by relying on practices and topoi that centered around the park and the trees that allowed a very diverse movement to unify. Interestingly enough, the notion of what it means to be a citizen in the city of Stuttgart, to take the park as a gift to the citizens of Stuttgart, addressed the concept of citizenship explicitly. After the felling, “the trees” allowed for rituals that might

have helped some protesters to reform and regroup through symbolic action whose aim was more internal than external. The mourning here represents a strategy to use when something has been irreparably destroyed, aimed at the reintegration of a group rather than affecting an opponent in a controversy. At the same time the trees seemed to demand this kind of ritual treatment. In conclusion, the materiality of place and thing affected participants in such a way that the theme “tree” was taken up not only intellectually, but also by experience.

“Well,” said the tree, straightening herself up as she could, “well an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come Boy, come sit down. Sit down and rest.” And the boy did. And the tree was happy... The end. (Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree*)

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