

## The emergence of ecological readings : rethinking ourselves through literature

French Ecocritique - Reading French Theory and Fiction Ecologically. Stephanie Posthumus

Posthumus, Stephanie. 2017. *French Ecocritique: Reading Contemporary French Theory and Fiction Ecologically*.

University of Toronto Romance Series. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Iris Delhoum

2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1059035ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1059035ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Département des littératures de langue française

ISSN

2104-3272 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Delhoum, I. (2018). Review of [The emergence of ecological readings : rethinking ourselves through literature : french Ecocritique - Reading French Theory and Fiction Ecologically. Stephanie Posthumus / Posthumus, Stephanie. 2017. *French Ecocritique: Reading Contemporary French Theory and Fiction Ecologically*. University of Toronto Romance Series. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.] *Sens public*. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1059035ar>

Article abstract

The 21st century is marked by unprecedented environmental issues and the climate change. These dramatic have a direct impact on societies all over the planet. Yet actually, our globalized societies, our consumption culture and our economic system are the source for many environmental issues and especially climate change. In order to find a proper response to this global emergency, we need a comparatist and transdisciplinary approach. For example, Stephanie Posthumus proposes to analyze the current ecological crisis by using literary theory and fiction instead of focusing on scientific theory, in order to create new concepts which give rise to new subjectivities. Her approach is based on the cultural specificities of French literature. By unifying literary theory and fiction, Posthumus uses, while creating it, the approach of “ecological readings”. This approach has four key concepts : “ecological subjectivity”, “ecological dwelling”, “ecological politic” and “ecological ends”. They are interconnected and central to the goal that aims to rethink humans and their environment. The author’s argument is shaped through questions as well as responses, and it leads us to challenge our point of views about our relation to nature, but also on the present and future role played by literature in a changing and unstable world.

Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) Sens Public, 2018



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>



The emergence of ecological readings :  
rethinking ourselves through literature

French Ecocritique - Reading French  
Theory and Fiction Ecologically  
Stephanie Posthumus

Iris Delhoum

Publié le 17-05-2018

<http://sens-public.org/article1325.html>



Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International  
(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

## **Abstract**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is marked by unprecedented environmental issues and the climate change. These dramatic have a direct impact on societies all over the planet. Yet actually, our globalized societies, our consumption culture and our economic system are the source for many environmental issues and especially climate change. In order to find a proper response to this global emergency, we need a comparatist and transdisciplinary approach. For example, Stephanie Posthumus proposes to analyze the current ecological crisis by using literary theory and fiction instead of focusing on scientific theory, in order to create new concepts which give rise to new subjectivities. Her approach is based on the cultural specificities of French literature. By unifying literary theory and fiction, Posthumus uses, while creating it, the approach of “ecological readings”. This approach has four key concepts : “ecological subjectivity”, “ecological dwelling”, “ecological politic” and “ecological ends”. They are interconnected and central to the goal that aims to rethink humans and their environment. The author’s argument is shaped through questions as well as responses, and it leads us to challenge our point of views about our relation to nature, but also on the present and future role played by literature in a changing and unstable world.

## **Résumé**

Les bouleversements climatiques sans précédent dans l’histoire de notre espèce que l’on connaît aujourd’hui ne peuvent être cantonnés à la sphère environnementale. Ils sont liés, par ce qui les cause, à l’ensemble de nos sociétés, de nos cultures et du système économique dominant. Il convient d’adopter une approche de plus en plus comparatiste et transdisciplinaire afin de répondre à une urgence globale. Sans analyser les crises écologiques et en s’appuyant sur les spécificités culturelles d’un corpus français, Stéphanie Posthumus propose d’allier la théorie et la fiction pour créer de nouveaux concepts permettant d’articuler des subjectivités inédites. Cette alliance se fait par des lectures « écologiques », qui feront émerger quatre concepts phares : la subjectivité écologique, l’habitat écologique, l’écologie politique et les fins écologiques. Tous sont interreliés et essentiels pour repenser les hommes et leur relation à leur environnement. Avançant par questionnements autant que par réponses, S. Posthumus nous conduit à nous interroger sur la relation

entre l'humain et la nature, autant que sur le rôle (actuel et futur) de la littérature dans un monde en transformation.

**Mots-clés** : littérature, transculturalité, études comparatistes, oïkos, lectures écologiques, posthumanisme, langage

**Keywords** : literature, transculturality, comparative studies, oïkos, ecological readings, posthumanism, language

# The emergence of ecological readings : rethinking ourselves through literature

Iris Delhoum

When we first read the word “écocritique”, we might be tempted to assume that the book will be a call for new ecological and green practices (especially in the case of such an unknown discipline). But S. Posthumus leaves no room for us to reduce her work to a report of environmental issues. From the beginning to the end, the focus is on the Human (but not in an anthropocentric way) and its relation to his environment. She defines her work by drawing contrasts, opposing her own approach to other concepts, and especially those of the French intellectual Luc Ferry. Posthumus uses him as a starting point to define French “écocritique” and its intellectual context; a concept she will later reject. As a well known French thinker, L. Ferry influenced the very beginning of the discipline in France, and this (negative) influence partly explains the difficulties faced by the ecocritique in the attempt to find its place in the intellectual sphere. In this way, many keys to the understanding of *French Ecocritique* are to be found in its relation to L. Ferry’s *Le nouvel ordre écologique* : S. Posthumus calls for a “culturally situated” (2017, 5) ecocritic approach, and looks for ways out of the universal humanism. She thus regularly reasserts the fact that we can’t separate matters of language from matters of cultures, they are interdependent and she need to take this into account if she aims to create global scale’s arguments. Justifying her work by this dichotomous structure, she quickly puts aside Ferry’s secular and liberal humanism, as well as a categorizing thought which separate nature from culture.

S. Posthumus will then seek to create arguments and concepts without falling into the trap of the universal and anthropocentric humanism, and she manages to do so by using dynamic and flexible concepts, transformations, which are

intrinsically organic and always in progress. All four chapters include a literary theorist and a fiction writer in order to illustrate the four concepts.

How can we create an ecological subjectivity and why is it essential to include the environment in a definition of ourselves? That's the question answered in the first chapter. Posthumus uses the concept of "écosophie", created by Arne Naess and developed by Felix Guattari and the fiction of Marie Darrieussecq.

Guattari's ambition is to construct an ethic and aesthetic paradigm, through three ecologies : the mental (linked to human psyche), the social (which consists of all societal practices) and the environmental (our relation to nature). What distinguish his work, and what connects him to Posthumus, is him seeing subjectivity as a steadily developing process. Like Posthumus, he refuses the idea of a fixed identity, of a transcendent self. That is one of the key points we can find in *French Ecocritique* if we focus on the author thoughts rather than those of the authors she analyses : if we want to rethink the human and its relation to its surroundings, it is essential not to deny but to acknowledge the materiality and the immanence of human experience (while is also an animal experience). It echoes the idea of ending the human exceptionalism ; an idea repeatedly presented in the book. It also opposes Ferry's nature-culture distinction. In contrast to him, Guattari and Darrieussecq erase this separation, by presenting an immanent and unstable subjectivity : the experience is necessarily embodied. And it is precisely this instability of fiction (the author uses autofiction, which interfere with literary conventions), which is nevertheless focused on individual experiences, that gives birth to the concept of ecological subjectivity. This union of theory and fiction seems essential to make a bridge between the local and the global, the abstract and the tangible.

This texts allow Posthumus to elaborate new theories, but also to illustrate her philosophy. Guattari's ecosophie echoes the book's concepts : just as the spheres of the ecocritique thought, the author's concepts are codependent and make sense in this very relation of dependence.

This first chapter presents the structure Posthumus is going to follow : she starts with a brief presentation of the authors (the "portraits"), then she focuses on theory, then on fiction, and she ends by uniting both. This structure helps her to clarify her thought and arguments.

Following the same plan in chapter two, the authors asks herself what it

means to live ecologically (2017, 10), which leads her to create the concept of “ecological dwelling”. Loyal to her ambitions and beliefs, she insists again that her book and the other works she studies are not restricted to concrete ideas of actions, aiming to fight environmental problems. I too insist on this point (and the book will force me to come back to it) because it might be the very reason why Posthumus work is so special in this discipline, while permitting her to reassert the literary importance of her argument. Following this idea, this chapter will not be about self sufficient houses. Just as the ecological subjectivity, the ecological dwelling refers the materiality of human experience, which is first experienced through the body and how it receives, perceives and interacts with its environment ; it being natural or cultural, because it now means nothing to separate both. Concerning theory, S. Posthumus leans on Michel Serres and his idea of “natural contract”. He uses the peasant figure (a strong image in a french context) to illustrate, at a local scale, some sort of symbiosis and co-dependence ; an image on which he relies to then erect an ecological dwelling at a global scale. The individual scale is also very important in the fiction part. Indeed, Marie-Hélène Lafon portrays, through individual life stories, the difficulty of a rural life and the threat hanging over the identity of the “peasant”. Her writing is realistic, nostalgia free, while showing how life is “composed, renewed and regenerated” (2017, 10), which joins the idea of transformation supported by S. Posthumus. That is also the bond between the theorist and the writer : they both intend to rethink our relation to the earth throughout the figure of the peasant. Moreover, the embodiment of the experience is at the heart of both discourses, both works. In M.-H. Lafon’s literature, the reader is deeply involved with sensations and perceptions ; Serres depicts the earth as a body constantly interacting with its environment (which includes humans). Finally, Serres and Lafon both point out to the embodiment of language : they experiment it as a storytelling place, as an ecological dwelling : “the French language represents an oikos for both Lafon and Serres, and so becomes one of ways in which they live and convey a sense of embodiment” (2017, 164). It also echoes Posthumus use of language, because by choosing to write in English while keeping some concepts and quotes in French, she highlights the fact that the language is tied to culture and to material processes. In all cases, taking the environment into account involves the language : “the reader becomes aware of the richness of the french language, its ability to go beyond abstract and universal concepts and describe the thick viscosity of the real world without necessarily imposing order on it” (2017, 92).

The priority of the material world continues and is reinforced in the third chapter, which asks what political system could allow us to include the non-human. Still following her leitmotiv, S. Posthumus maintains that the ecological politics need to be critical of the environmentalism while proposing a new ecological paradigm. A paradigm which would not get trapped in the fight between humanism and anti-humanism (trap that Ferry does not avoid). The author follows Bruno Latour's philosophy, for whom we have to make room in the cultural systems for the non-human, but without attributing an intrinsic value to nature, unlike how it is done in the english traditional thought. He also rejects the nature culture separation, and the distinction between "matters of facts from matters of concern" (2017, 102), and points out the french particularity while separating himself from L. Ferry. All these beliefs are to be found in Jean-Christophe Rufin's books, whose work is analysed in this chapter. His stories are also critical of the english environmentalism while asking the question of the place taken by the non human in the contemporary democratic systems.

The concept of ecological politics emerges as a powerful way to respond to global issues by using french singularity concerning our relation to nature and the environment. It's also the first part of the book which critics capitalism without reserve. It is meaningful that the author seems to have waited to tackle head on the political sphere and to thus attack our current economic system. Of course, her disapproval is implicit from the beginning, but saying it outloud has a special meaning in this chapter. Indeed, the capitalist system is shaped to encourage greenwashing. Yet, it does not actually change the system, and this change, which is to find a way out of capitalism, is central the Posthumus' aspiration of a "common world". That is why she fits more in Latour's philosophy, instead of Rufin's. The second, although also critical of capitalism, wishes to come back to an universal capitalism ; Latour's argues for an ecological politic which would integrate the non human to the democratic system, while getting out of capitalism : "by giving voice to a common world, they reveal a path toward deeper systemic change than simply « greening » current « economic » practices" (2017, 124).

This concept of ecological politics allows us to conceive groundbreaking changes which are today essentials : by integrating the non-human to political matters (Latour calls for a parliament of things) we would give voice to a larger numbers of living things, we would extent the power and responsibility of the polis. First, the non-living cannot continue to be set apart, that needs



to be said, and it would naturally helps us to get out of a anthropocentric humanism. Finally, it would help us to imagine a way out of capitalism. And it's important to say a few word about my use of the verb "imagine", which refocuses on literature. Indeed, if we want to conceive new worlds, we need to use storytelling, a narrative voice, to consider history as a fiction : "the novels create room for ecological readings that identify other ways of viewing and experiencing the world, that bring an awareness of political issues to the text rather than reducing the text to a single political message" (2017, 125). Literature and fictions are vitals to the conception of changes as enormous as these ones, because it allows each and everyone of us to feel and experiences what is still unfamiliar.

The importance of the writing and reading experiences is at the heart of the last chapter (and concept), entitled "ecological ends". In these last lines, the "human" is relevant mainly because he is a "homo literatus". Michel Houellebecq, well known for his overall pessimist point of view, describes different posthuman conditions in his fictions, or at least post humanity as we know it today. This chapter also focus on the role this ends might play, in terms of their possible impact on the popular imagination. Thinking about the very likely extinction of the human species is a highly unpleasant thought experiment , but with a great potential : it allows us to replace the human to its original condition, which is a biological entity, a part of the living world. This conception leaves no room for the human exceptionalism and it is this very ecological end of humans as a privileged specie that Houellebecq and Schaeffer represent (but without using apocalyptic views, the books examine the human life possible transformations, including cloning). Nevertheless, this material view of humans puts them at risk of falling into biological reductionism, and that is what distinguishes the authors. If Schaeffer manages to "articulates a non dualistic view of the nature culture continuum" (a concept that, as we know, Pothumus cherishes), Houellebecq chooses to "illustrate a problematic determinism according to which humans and animals are bound to the « laws of nat »" (2017, 128). These questions are part of the broader subject of posthumanism, which is itself divided in two parts : one approaches the human / machine binarism ; the other terminates the human / animal binarism, and its goal to rethink our ethical responsibility concerning animals. Furthermore, the notion of animality is very relevant in a french context. Schaeffer conceptualizes it through the question of ethics, and advocates for a more systematic consideration of scientific and social

datas, for taking into account the contexts of the studies, in order to reach a non-binary and non-dualistic view of humans and animals. “The living” also emerges as a concept, precisely to put a word on this absence of distinction between humans and animals, and between them and their environment. In Schaeffer’s mind, evolution cannot be seen as theological and based on the principle of natural selection. This position can be taken as another way of asking the question of our survival.

Despite this philosophy, Houellebecq sees natural selection as impossible to avoid and reduces human to its worst capacities. But its fiction remain relevant in the analysis of literature. In her studies Posthumus distinguishes two different and interesting conceptions, which are interesting because they are different : on the one hand Houellebecq offers a humanistic belief in literature, which appears as essential to the human condition and experience ; and on the other hand it does stop him from depicting a posthumanist world in which literature does not exist anymore : “they reveal a productive tension between a posthumanist view of humans as part of the natural world and a humanist rethinking of the role of literature and stories in the larger context of humans as species” (2017, 156). In this work, literature is the supreme human capacity, but a capacity that is neither biological nor everlasting. Houellebecq’s vision allows us to enter a future in which there is no new stories, no new narratives, while Schaeffer proposes to extend these notions. He is in favor of a broader vision of these terms, which would include movies, video games, digital writing and all other contemporary fictional productions, which are not handwritten (without shutting this one out).

This last vision concludes the presentation of the ecological ends and fits with the idea of a more comparatist approach, and permits to increase the ways of feeling and experiencing the word.

S. Posthumus finishes her book by summarizing it, and by going through the concepts we followed : “While critical of the humanistic self, my ecocritical approach includes the human without resurrecting the universal (white, male) human subject. It does so by emphasizing processes of subjectivity, examining the modes of embodiment, opening politics up to the agency of non-humans, and accepting science as a way of making forms of life matter, as a way of « rendering » certain material processes and not other” (2017, 159). Her work has the strength of opening new paths to literary approaches, theoretical as well as fictional, while drawing attention on the great role these disciplines can

and must play in the contemporary context of ecological and social crisis (and especially from a comparatist perspective). That said, the study is essentially based on white male books, and focuses on French identity, which is already traditionally enlightened and highly considered. But Posthumus points these facts out herself, and we need to keep in mind that the french characteristics are a starting point to reach the global scale.

Literature then arises as vital in the way we are thinking about the human and could even be a great help in the near future if we want to survive as a specie, as a medium to create and spread experiences. Reuniting fiction and theory as she does appears extremely profitable, yet we can be critical about her drastic way of rejecting any form of environmentalism and the concrete ideas the humanity could benefit in its attempt to make a radical change. Rethinking subjectivities, replacing the human as a biological entity, creating new posthumanist visions which would integrate the non living world, all of this needs to be embodied in concrete experiences.

## Bibliography

Posthumus, Stephanie. 2017. *French Ecocritique : Reading Contemporary French Theory and Fiction Ecologically*. University of Toronto Romance Series. Tortonto : University of Toronto Press.