Cultural and Arts Studies, 2026, Volume 2, Issue 3
https://www.bbwpublisher.com/journal/CAS
Online ISSN: 3083-3949
Print ISSN: 3083-3957

Vegetal Witnessing and Historical Narrative in *Silent Friend*

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Abstract: A century passes through the botanical garden in Ildikó Enyedi's *Silent Friend* (2025), but no character remembers all three periods. The ginkgo seems to provide that missing continuity. Yet its position as a witness depends on the film, not on evidence that a tree can recall human events. Reading the stories of Grete, Hannes, and Professor Wong alongside the garden's changing rules and the film's contrasting photographic formats, this essay examines how historical connections are made without a shared human narrator. Ricoeur's account of testimony, work on cultural memory, and Marder's thinking about vegetal life help distinguish persistence from remembrance. The argument is that Enyedi gives the ginkgo a place in historical narration while withholding the voice and knowledge a conventional witness would possess. Its silence changes how the human stories are viewed; it does not resolve what plant experience is.

Keywords: Vegetal witnessing; Historical narrative; Cultural memory; Botanical garden; Film narration

Online publication: June 30, 2026

1. Introduction

Three different ginkgo trees played the single, century-old tree in *Silent Friend*. Enyedi and her crew looked for specimens with a distinctive low, almost horizontal branch, then relied on the resemblance to make their separate bodies appear continuous [1]. This detail could pass unnoticed by anyone watching the film. For a study of its historical narration, however, it is revealing. The endurance on screen is something cinema has patiently assembled.

Enyedi places her three stories in the botanical garden of the University of Marburg. In 1908, Grete, represented as the university's first woman student, uses photography to pursue an interest in plants. The student Hannes encounters a geranium through Gundula's experiments in 1972; his curiosity grows in ways he hardly anticipates. In 2020, COVID-19 interrupts the work of Professor Wong, a neuroscientist from Hong Kong, and leaves him spending time with the old ginkgo [2]. They do not know one another. Neither has access to the other's life, and their encounters with plants differ considerably.

The festival synopsis presents the tree as a witness to human change. That is an attractive description, though it carries a problem: surviving an event is not the same as remembering it. The ginkgo offers neither an account of Grete's difficulties nor an explanation of Wong's experiment.

Rather than attribute a hidden archive to the tree, I read its witnessing as a relation constructed between the recurring garden and the spectator. We recognize what the characters cannot: the ground beneath their feet has hosted other lives and other ideas about nature. How the film grants us this knowledge, without pretending to grant the tree a human consciousness, is the question pursued here.

2. A garden that keeps no records

To call someone a witness ordinarily implies more than physical presence. Ricoeur [3], discussing testimony in the relation between memory and history, considers the movement from a person's recollection to a claim that others may examine. A witness can tell a story, be questioned about it, or encounter competing accounts. The ginkgo cannot enter that exchange. Nothing in its visible age allows an observer to recover, unaided, what a woman thought in 1908 or why a visiting scientist acted as he did in 2020. What the tree contributes is a living continuity against which cinematic accounts of those years can be placed.

The botanical garden itself is hardly untouched nature. Someone has planted, fenced, maintained, and named what grows there. Plants keep growing in ways that do not always answer to those decisions, but the arrangement of the grounds is also a social arrangement.

Enyedi's account of the production includes a small, telling contrast. For the 1908 scenes, the grass is protected by low fences. Students in the 1970s, by contrast, are at ease sitting across the lawns [4]. It is easy to miss the change while following the characters. Once noticed, it gives history a material scale: a boundary once respected almost automatically has ceased to organize ordinary movements. The shifts in dress and hairstyle reinforce the difference, yet the garden remains recognizable enough for us to compare one use of space with another. Continuity and change are registered together, rather than assigned to separate historical illustrations.

Assmann [5] treats places and images as important supports for cultural remembering. The garden can function in this way for spectators, particularly because we repeatedly return to it after moving through time. Still, it would be misleading to identify it with an archive. Gardens preserve some things by removing others; their apparent stability comes from constant work, and living growth is not a reliable record of why people behaved as they did.

This limitation matters. The earlier inhabitants have disappeared. Their concerns survive only through the film's reconstruction, which necessarily selects details and leaves others outside the frame. The tree does not repair those omissions. Indeed, its continued presence makes the missing human voices more apparent.

3. Three historical ways of looking

Grete's work with a camera in 1908 is bound up with the question of who may produce knowledge. She wishes to look closely at plants, but the university around her treats a woman's scientific ambition as an exception. This is more than a backdrop to the plot. The institution is willing to classify and display forms of life while imposing restrictions on a person who hopes to study them. Her photography unsettles that division. As Garner [6] notes, the close photograph can attend to an individual specimen differently from an

illustration organized to show a general type. A camera does not free Grete from the social rules she faces; it offers her a practical way of developing an observation of her own. The film's interest is not merely that an image gets made, but that a particular observer insists on making it.

Yet the photograph is no transparent access to a plant. Distance, framing, and the choice of what deserves attention have already shaped the record. Grete can show features that a conventional illustration might overlook without capturing the experience, if any, of being the photographed organism.

The 1972 story starts in a looser register. Hannes is drawn into Gundula's attempt to investigate whether plants respond to the world around them; before long, the geranium holds his attention for reasons that seem to exceed the assignment. Instead of an ancient tree bearing the weight of history, there is an everyday plant that requires regular care. Hannes's awkwardness makes the encounter persuasive. The less dramatic the geranium appears, the more conspicuous his changed conduct becomes. Garner emphasizes the film's interest in the uncertain possibilities of communication across living forms. What we can safely say is narrower: Hannes comes to regard a plant as something worth waiting for, rather than a piece of the room's furnishings.

Enyedi links the early 1970s to experiments with perception and with inherited ideas about humanity's place in nature. The crowded, accessible lawn belongs to that atmosphere, though the freedom to experiment is not proof of success. A participant hoping to receive an answer may interpret any irregularity as a reply. The film allows this uncertainty to remain close to the pleasure of trying. Its interest is as much in the human willingness to attend as in the possibility that the geranium attends in return.

By 2020, the language has changed again. Wong brings scientific equipment to his investigation of the ginkgo after the pandemic disrupts his work on infant cognition. The situation gives his inquiry an emotional urgency absent from a laboratory description. He is far from home; the nearly deserted university no longer provides the ordinary social exchanges that accompany research. A signal registered by an instrument may be worth investigating, but it cannot be translated automatically into the familiar terms of friendship, intention, or feeling. His experiment sits at that uncomfortable point between a measurable response and the meaning a lonely observer wishes it could carry.

The caretaker's suspicion of Wong adds another constraint. As Garner observes, mistrust complicates their dealings; the professor cannot treat the garden as if it were his private laboratory. He needs another person to permit, or at least understand, what he is doing. The wish to cross a boundary between species is thus entangled with a much more familiar difficulty of communicating across human differences.

There is no simple ascent from Grete's camera through Hannes's geranium to Wong's apparatus. Each has a different means of attending to plants, and each confronts particular forms of resistance. What changes across the century is not the arrival of a final explanation. It is the range of questions people feel entitled, or compelled, to ask.

4. Editing a century

The historical periods are distinguished by their photographic textures: black-and-white 35 mm for 1908, color 16 mm for 1972, and digital cinematography for 2020. These are contemporary choices about representing earlier years, not surviving images from those years. The grain of film may encourage us to feel close to the past, but its texture has been deliberately made to do so. That distinction is essential in a work so concerned with observation.

The stories also depend on how they are placed beside one another. Bordwell [7] describes film narration in terms of the cues through which viewers construct relations and events. No protagonist in *Silent Friend* could supply a remembered account joining 1908, 1972, and 2020. Enyedi instead wrote the timelines separately, then allowed their echoes and differences to meet in the editing [8]. The result is deliberately incomplete. One story does not conclude by explaining another; an old corner of the garden simply returns, now occupied by people who have no knowledge of those previously seen there. We carry the earlier image forward. For a moment we see more of the place's human history than any of its present inhabitants can see.

That privilege belongs to the spectator, not to an imagined memory inside the ginkgo. Editing can move between decades almost instantly; the growth of a tree cannot. The film invites us to feel the discrepancy without trying to overcome it.

Marder [9] argues for understanding vegetal existence on its own terms rather than reducing plants to useful objects. In *Silent Friend*, the ginkgo's longer duration puts human commitments into a different proportion. Careers and private preoccupations fill a person's days, whereas the tree persists through changes in what the university considers normal. Yet viewers never experience those years as a tree would. We receive a few carefully chosen intervals, with enormous stretches left unshown. The production's three ginkgos make the paradox almost tangible: cinema produces a sense of continuous vegetal time from several distinct organisms.

Erll's [10] account of memory as culturally mediated is helpful here. Repeated locations, changes in image quality, and the spectator's own recollection organize the film's past into a meaningful pattern. The garden gives comparison a place to begin, not a standpoint from which everything can finally be known. Historical distance remains visible in the differences between the stories, and in what each leaves unsaid.

5. The silence that matters

Enyedi could have supplied a voice for the ginkgo, or imagined a sequence revealing the world as the tree experiences it. She chose not to. In her statement for the Venice Film Festival, she refuses to present a tree's inner perspective as something a human filmmaker can know. That decision is central to the film's modesty. The camera may linger on a plant, but looking closely is not the same as speaking for it.

Nagel's [11] discussion of the difficulty of grasping another creature's subjective experience offers a useful comparison, with one important qualification. His argument concerns an animal and begins from a discussion of conscious experience. Whether plants have anything comparable remains disputed; the essay about bats cannot establish an inner life for a ginkgo. Used carefully, however, the analogy marks a limit in Wong's work and in the film itself. Equipment may reveal responses, and attentive observation may reshape a person's conduct. Neither finding warrants the confident claim that the observer has arrived inside the plant's world. Enyedi's restraint leaves room for curiosity without manufacturing an answer.

There is also an ethical difference between granting the tree significance and making it serve as a spokesperson for the three human stories. A talking tree might tidy up the century with a judgment about progress, isolation, or human error. This one does not. The viewer must live with the absence of that verdict.

Vegetal witnessing, in this reading, names a limited but consequential role. A living organism outlasts successive visitors; the garden's customs alter around it; and cinema brings those otherwise separate moments into contact. The ginkgo cannot authenticate the film's account of the past. What it can do, by remaining silent within that account, is keep us from treating the human view as the only possible measure of time.

6. Conclusion

The three stories in *Silent Friend* are connected without a family history, a common narrator, or an eyewitness who can speak for the century. Grete's photographs, Hannes's attention to a geranium, and Wong's investigation of the ginkgo each belong to a different moment in the history of looking at plants. The botanical garden supplies a setting whose rules and occupants change, while the film's images allow viewers to compare what none of the characters can remember together. Even the central tree's apparent continuity is the outcome of casting and editing rather than the record of a single filmed organism.

Calling the ginkgo a witness remains worthwhile if the word is not pushed too far. The film gives its enduring presence historical force, but does not turn that presence into testimony. The distance between those two things—between staying and remembering—is where its most thoughtful account of human and vegetal life takes shape.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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