

GESM 120 Seminar in Humanistic Inquiry

Fall 2016

Location: VKC 254

Time: T/Th 9:30-10:50 am

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Office Hours: T/Th 12:30-2.30 pm and by appointment

Plants Attack! Botany and the Uncanny Plant in Fiction, Film and Ecological Thought

“...Can that be you, gentle iris, that monster with the hair-covered tongue? And what maleficent grimace is this, twisting the mouth of the opening rose? Twenty devil’s horns ring the tops of the cornflower and the carnation. The climbing pea strikes like a python’s head, and the germination of a fistful of lentils gives motion to a writhing mass of hydras...” Colette

Course Description:

As human beings, we have a deep-seated perceptual bias toward those other living beings that actively move and resemble us (such as animals), so we tend to ignore plants which do not or only barely interact with us. This human “handicap” makes us often dismiss plants as lifeless things, backdrop to our world, or foodstuff and raw material, but it has also generated a rich (albeit at times fanciful) tradition of wondering about and representing the so-called “secret life of plants.” This course examines how, alongside the development of modern botany, the plant emerges as an uncanny figure in literature, film, and art. The significance of cultural representations of plants is sizable as they reveal to us that living beings on Planet Earth are multiple and multifarious. Their difference from us may in turn help us better define what it means to be human. Since at least the eighteenth century, plants have revealed to us the strangeness of life, put in question the centrality of human beings in the universe, and, in our era of ongoing environmental crises, forced us to think about crucial choices we have to make including our choice of foodstuff and what forms of life we protect.

In the discussions, we examine the centrality of plants as promoters of a new materialist and Heliocentric model of the universe in the early modern period, their role in vitalist Romantic poetry as mediators that allow human beings feel affectively connected to the world, the uncanny turn in gothic fiction and its ties to exploring the Earth’s different biomes, the rise of monstrous plants in fiction in the wake of evolutionary theory, plant horror in cinema, where plants become ironic doubles of the human to question authorities, the turn to plants in personal memoirs, writings on gender and sexuality, and more recent environmentally conscious cinema, art, philosophy, and journalism. Popular culture, the uncanny plant, will form the thread tying together questions about aesthetics, philosophy, and ecological thought in the course in a way that in the process popular

culture gains new meaning and the concepts of aesthetic and ecological theories will be fleshed out. We will also tour our very own University Park campus with the guidance of the campus arborist to learn more about the plants with which we share the space where we all live and thrive.

No gardening experience is required but rather an interest in literature, the arts, popular culture, philosophy, and a willingness to consider critical approaches to ecology. Plants “attack” not only in Hollywood B movies, but they also help us reflect on and question our assumptions about the hierarchy and value of beings in our world.

Each student will be responsible for keeping up with the readings and viewings. The materials marked for each session need to be read (or viewed) by the time of the discussion. Readings are available at the bookstore, electronically, or as a handout distributed beforehand in class. In addition, students submit written comments by each Tuesday (to the discussion thread on blackboard), and comment on each other’s comments during the second half of the week, prepare one short individual presentation (3-5 minutes), one midterm essay (4 pages), one long oral presentation (20 minutes) in collaboration with a classmate, and a final paper (7 pages).

Learning Objectives:

Students will:

- learn how the cultural perception of plants changes with the advent of modern botanical sciences, modern food production, and climate change.
- discover connections and influences between scientific ideas about life and literature, film, and philosophy
- understand that to be human is relative to other forms of life
- understand main ideas in ecological thought in the humanities
- practice formulating their ideas about all these topics in clear prose both orally and in writing
- practice critical thinking and the techniques of literary analysis
- learn to collaborate in small in-class discussions, on line in discussion threads, and in class presentations

Some basics:

- * Keep up with the reading (and viewing) schedule and plan ahead. Think about budgeting your time.
- * Come to class prepared to discuss the week’s materials.
- * Keep up with handouts and other class notes.
- * Avail yourself of our consultation times and schedule at least one consultation this semester.
- * Be punctual; class will always begin on time.
- * Changes to the schedule may occur during the semester and will be announced in class. Keep up with the schedule and email me if in doubt.
- * Do not miss class; unexcused absences will lower your final grade.
- * Do not leave class before the end.

- * Do not request extensions for papers.
- * And never turn in written work that is not strictly your own.
- *Missing work will have a significant impact on your ability to pass this course.

Final grade breakdown:

Class participation, quizzes, in-class writing assignments: 15%
 Weekly discussion thread: 10%
 Short presentation: 10%
 First essay (4 pages): 10%
 Second essay (4 pages): 10 %
 Midterm Exam: 10%
 Long presentation (20 minutes): 10%
 Final essay (7 pages): 15%
 Final Exam: 10%

Required readings, films, and artistic materials:

Aristotle. *On the Soul*. (Excerpts on blackboard)
 [Pseudo-]Aristotle. "On Plants." *Minor works*. Trans. W. S. Hett. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1936. Pp 141-233. (excerpts on blackboard)
 Chamovitz, Daniel. *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses*. New York: Scientific American / Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 2012.
 Colette. *Colette at the Movies*. New York: Ungar, 1975. (excerpts available on blackboard)
 Cyrano de Bergerac, Savinien "Voyage to the Moon" (excerpts on blackboard)
 Darwin, Charles. *Insectivorous Plants*. London: John Murray, 1875. (excerpts on blackboard, full text available on Darwin Online)
 ---. *The Power of Movement in Plants*. London: John Murray, 1880. (excerpts on blackboard, full text available on Darwin Online)
 Darwin, Erasmus. *The Botanic Garden. Part II. Containing The Loves of the Plants*. The Echo Library, 2007. (bookstore)
 Epstein, Jean. *The Intelligence of a Machine*. Trans. Christophe Wall-Romana. Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014. (excerpts on blackboard)
 Finney, Jack. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Simon & Schuster, 1954. (bookstore)
 Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Rappaccini's Daughter*. London: Hesperus, 2003.
 Kaufman, Philip. Dir. *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) (Leavey reserves)
 La Mettrie, Julien Offray de. *Man A Machine and Man A Plant*. Trans. Richard A. Watson and Maya Rybalka. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994. (bookstore)
 Marder, Michael. *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. (excerpts on blackboard and bookstore)
 Miller, T. S. "Lives of the Monster Plants: The Revenge of the Vegetable in the Age of Animal Studies." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. 23: 3 (2012), 460- (blackboard)
 Nyby, Christian. *The Thing from Another World* (1951) (Leavey reserves)
 Nealon, Jeoffrey. *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. (excerpts on blackboard)

Saunders, Charles. Dir. *The Woman Eater* (1958) (Leavey reserves)
Shelley, P. B. "The Sensitive Plant" (blackboard)
Jahren, Hope. *Lab Girl*. NY: Knopf, 2016. (bookstore)

Recommended additional readings and materials for final projects:

Ayres, Peter. *The Aliveness of Plants: The Darwins at the Dawn of Plant Science*. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008.
Doherty, Dornith. *Archiving Eden*
---. *Archiving Eden II*.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M79V10prO90>
<http://vimeo.com/7260694>
Seto, Momoko. *Planet Z*. 2011.
<http://vimeo.com/48299450>
Hallé, Francis. *In Praise of Plants*. Portland, OR: Timber Press, 2002.
Siegel, Don. Dir. *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)
Meeker, Natania and Antónia Szabari. "From the Century of the Pods to the Century of the Plants: Plant Horror, Politics, and Vegetal Ontology." *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical studies in Media and Culture* 34.1 (Winter 2012), 32-58.
Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.
---. "Pandora'Box: Avatar, Ecology, Thought." *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*. Ed. Gerry Canava and Kim Stanley Robinson. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2014, 206-225.

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" <https://policy.usc.edu/student/scampus/part-b>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking, and harassment are prohibited by the university. You are encouraged to report all incidents to the Office of Equity and Diversity/Title IX Office <http://equity.usc.edu> and/or to the Department of Public Safety <http://dps.usc.edu>. This is important for the health and safety of the whole USC community. Faculty and staff must report any information regarding an incident to the Title IX Coordinator who will provide outreach and information to the affected party. The sexual assault resource center webpage <http://sarc.usc.edu> fully describes reporting options. Relationship and Sexual Violence Services <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp> provides 24/7 confidential support.

Support Systems

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://ali.usc.edu>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* <http://dsp.usc.edu> provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

Schedule of Classes:

Week 1. A Little Botany: Ancient and Renaissance

August 23 Introduction. Excerpts from Aristotle, Pseudo-Aristotle, Della Porta, etc.

August 25 Plants for a Heliocentric Universe: excerpts from Cyrano de Bergerac, *Voyage to the Moon*

Week 2 Plant Physiology and Imaginative Fiction, Reproduction, and the Gender Politics of Botany

August 30 De la Mettrie, *Man A Plant*, pp. 77-92.

September 1 Erasmus Darwin, *The Loves of Plants*, *Loves*, Cantos I-II

Week 3. Romantic Vitalism and the Uncanny Plant

September 6 Shelley, "The Sensitive Plant," Hawthorne, *Rappaccini's Daughter*

September 8 Gothic Plants and Explorations of the Earth's biomes in 19th century; reading: Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher"

Week 4 Charles and Francis Darwin: Evolution and Plant movement

Sept. 13 excerpts from Charles Darwin, *Insectivorous Plants*

Sept. 15 The technique of registering plant movement as a precursor to cinema: excerpts from Charles and Frances Darwin, *The Movement of Plants*. **First essay due**

Week 5. The Monster Plant in pulp fiction and film

Sept 20 "The Monster Plant" (short story, blackboard)

Sept 22 *The Woman Eater* (1958) (on electronic reserves); reading: Miller, "Monster Plants"

Week 6. Plant Biology, Experimental Cinema, and Life in Modern Cities

Sept. 27 View Percy Smith's shorts collected under the title "The Plants" (on reserve at Leavey)

Sept. 29 The plant and the aesthetics of waking up the fatigued urban masses: excerpts from Colette (electronic reserves), Epstein (electronic reserves)

Week 7. Destabilizing Human Authority in the Cold War Era

October 4 **Mid-Term Exam**

October 6 discussion of *The Thing from Another World* and Finney, *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (bookstore)

Week 9. Global Capitalism, Biopolitics, and Plants

Oct. 11 View *The Invasions of the Body snatchers* (1978), reading: excerpts from Nealon, *Plant Theory* (blackboard)

Oct. 13 Plants on site: guided tour of University Park Campus with arborist.

Week 10. Biological Science and Feminist Eco-Fantasy

Jahren, *Lab Girl*

Oct. 18 pp. TBD

Oct. 20 pp. no class—finish reading *Lab Girl*. **Second essay due**

Week 11. Algorithmic Trees, Plants and Digital Media

Oct. 25 *Avatar*

Oct. 27 discussion of film continued

Week 12. Food Production, Apple Breeding, Human-Plant Evolutionary Conversations

Michael Pollan and Jessica Rath

Nov. 1 Pollan, “The Apple”; Rath, “Take Me to the Apple Breeder”

Nov. 3 Discussion continued. (Alternately, visit to local art gallery/museum.)

Week 13. Student Presentations

Nov. 8 Presentations

Nov. 10 Presentations

Week 14. Student Presentations

Nov. 15 Presentations

Nov. 17 Presentations

Week 15.

Nov. 22 Plant Ethics/Plant Right? Readings: excerpt from Marder, *Plant Thinking* and Chamowitz, *What A Plant Knows*

Nov. 24 Thanksgiving Break

Week 16.

December 1 Conclusions. **Final Papers Due December 8, 3pm in the office**

Final exam: for date and time, see schedule of classes

Students with disabilities and academic accommodations:

Students requesting accommodations based on a disability are required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP when adequate documentation is filed. DSP is open Monday-Friday, 8:30-5:00. The office is in Student Union 301 and their phone number is 213.740.0776.