

## GESM 120 Seminar in Humanistic Inquiry

SPRING 2018

Location: VKC 261

Tuesday, Thursday: 2-3.30 pm

Prof. Antónia Szabari

Email: [szabari@usc.edu](mailto:szabari@usc.edu)

Office: THH 155B

*(hint: my office is inside the main office suit of the Department of French & Italian)*

Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday, 10-11 am and by appointment

### Plants Attack! -- Botany, Plant Horror, and Philosophy

“...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

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. As human beings, we have a deep-seated perceptual bias toward those other living beings that actively move (such as animals) while we tend to ignore plants who do not or only barely interact with us. This human “handicap” not only makes us dismiss plants as mere objects, but it has also led to a series of reflections on the secret life of plants. This course examines how, alongside the development of modern botany, the plant emerges as an uncanny figure in literature and film. The significance of cultural representations of plants is sizable as they reveal to us that living beings are multiple and multifarious and help us define better what it means to be human (or posthuman!). Since at least the eighteenth century, plants have revealed to us the strangeness of life and the complexities of the physical world, have put in question the centrality of human beings in the universe, and, in our era of ongoing environmental crises, force us to think about crucial choices we have to make including about what we consume and what forms of life we protect.

In our class discussions, we examine early modern science-based fiction and botanical poetry, vitalist Romantic poetry as helping human beings feel affectively connected to the world, the uncanny turn in gothic fiction and its ties to exploration of the Earth’s different biomes, the frightening aspect of monstrous plants in fiction that arises with the discovery of an evolutionary connection between animals and plants, plant horror in cinema, where plants become ironic doubles of the human to question authorities, and more recent environmentally conscious fiction, art, philosophy, and journalism.

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.

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 prepare two short individual presentations (5 minutes), two essays (3 and 4 pages, respectively), one long oral presentation (20 minutes), a mid-term and final exam, and a final paper (6 pages).

Final grade breakdown:

Class participation, quizzes, in-class writing assignments: 15%

2 short presentations: 15%

First essay (3 pages): 10%

Second essay (4 pages) 10 %

Midterm Exam: 10%

Long presentation (20 minutes): 15%

Final essay (6 pages): 15%

Final Exam: 10%

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; absences, except for documented medical emergencies, 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.

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.

Plagiarism Note:

All your work must be original, with proper citation for use of outside sources; there are high penalties for plagiarism, including reporting the infraction to the Dean.

Schedule of Classes:

### Week 1. **Our plant blindness and the surprising cultural history of plants**

January 9 Introduction

January 11 Plant soul and Plant biology: from ancient to modern botany: Read: excerpts from Aristotle, Pseudo-Aristotle (in-class handout) and Chapter 1 Hallé, *In Praise of Plants* (Blackboard)

### Week 2 **The Enlightenment plant**

January 16 Plant Machines: Read: De la Mettrie, *Man A Plant*, pp. 77-92.

January 18 Are you a Plant or a Human? Read: Finish La Mettrie

### Week 3. **The Romantic Plant 1**

January 23 Plant Marriages. Read: Erasmus Darwin, *The Loves of Plants*, *Loves*, Cantos I-II

January 25 Plant-Human Mutuality. Read: P. B. Shelley, "The Sensitive Plant," on Blackboard

### Week 4 **The Romantic Plant 2**

January 30 Evil Botany. Read: Hawthorne, *Rappaccini's Daughter*

February 1 Posthuman and "Vegetable Sentience." Read: Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," on Blackboard. **First essay due on questions distributed in advance**

## Week 5. **Plant Movement: From Botany to the electric plant and cinema**

February 6 Evolution and Plant movement. Read: excerpts from Charles and Frances Darwin, *The Movement of Plants*, online source.

February 8 View: Percy Smith's shorts collected under the title "The Plants," on reserve at Leavey Library, Jean Commandon, "The Growth of Plants," viewing in class

## Week 6. **The Monster Plant**

February 13 Read: excerpts from Charles Darwin, *Insectivorous Plants* Miller, "Monster Plants"

February 15 Monster Plant Continued. View: View *The Invasions of the Body snatchers*, dir. Ph. Kaufman (1978), on reserve at Leavey Library. **Second essay due on questions distributed in advance**

## Week 7. **Late Capitalism and Plants 1**

February 20 **Mid-Term Exam.**

February 22 Plants the new Animals? Read: Excerpts from Nealon, *Plant Theory*, on Blackboard

## Week 8. **Late Capitalism and Plants 2**

February 27 The Phytoplanton and other rhizomes, Read: excerpts from Deleuzer & Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, on Blackboard, and continue Nealon, on Blackboard.

March 1 Pollan, "The Potato," on Blackboard.

## Week 9. **Food Production and Human-Plant Evolutionary Conversations**

March 6; Rath, "Take Me to the Apple Breeder"

March 8 The Mesh and ecological fiction. Read: *Annihilation*, pp. 1-95

## Week 10. **SPRING BREAK**

March 13 spring break

March 15 spring break

## Week 11. **Ecosystems and other hyperobjects 1**

March 20 Hyperobjects and algorithmic plants. Readings: excerpts from Morton, *Hyperobjects*

March 22 **No class**

## Week 12. **Ecosystems and other hyperobjects 2**

March 27 Discussion of *Annihilation*. Read: finish the novel

March 29 **Can Plants Think?** Read: Michael Marder's "plant Thinking" Read: excerpt from Marder, *Plant Thinking* and Chamowitz, *What A Plant Knows*

**Week 13. Are plants ethical subjects? Should they have rights?**

April 3 Plants and trauma. Read: excerpts from Marder and Tondeur, *Herbarium*, available online

April 5 The last refuge? Read, *The Vegetarian*, pp. 1-87.

**Week 14. Can Plants Feel? and presentations**

April 10 Read, *The Vegetarian*, pp. 87-end.

April 12 Presentations

**Week 15. Student presentations**

April 17 Presentations.

April 19 Presentations

**Week 16. Students' presentations & Conclusion**

April 24 Presentations

April 26 Conclusion. **Final Essay Due**

**Final Exam: May 3, 2018**

Required readings, films, and art:

Aristotle. *On the Soul*. Excerpts in handout.

Chamovitz, Daniel. *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses*. New York: Scientific American / Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 2012.

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)

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Rappaccini's Daughter*. London: Hesperus, 2003. (bookstore)

Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian: A Novel*. Trans. from the Korean by Deborah Smith. New York: Hogarth, 2015. (bookstore)

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 book available in bookstore)

--- and Anaïs Tondeur, *Chernobyl Herbarium: Fragments of an Exploded Consciousness*. Open Humanities Press, 2014. Available for download:

<http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/titles/the-chernobyl-herbarium/>

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)

Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Nealon, Jeffrey. *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. (excerpts on blackboard)

Pollan, Michael. "The Potato," *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World*. New York: Random House, 2002. (on Blackboard)

Rath, Jessica. "Take Me to the Apple Breeder," Exhibit,  
<http://jessicarath.com/blog/projects/take-me-to-the-apple-breeder/>

Shelley, P. B. "The Sensitive Plant" (blackboard)

VanderMeer, Jeff. *Annihilation (The Southern Reach Trilogy, Book 1)*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014. (bookstore)