

GESM 120-section 35373 Seminar in Humanistic Inquiry
FALL 2018

Location: THH 215

M/W: 2-3.20 pm

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

Office Hours: M/W, 10am - 12pm am and by appointment

Plants Attack! – in Literature, Art, 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 (4-5 minutes), two essays (3 and 4 pages, respectively), one long oral presentation (10 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 (10 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.

MAKE-UP POLICY

Students who can verify that they missed class or were prevented from completing assignments are permitted to make up the work they missed if the absence is due to one of the reasons listed below. It is the students' responsibility to provide original documentation to their instructor for the following valid absences:

- illness: 1) a medical excuse from a doctor or appropriate health-care provider; 2) two "self-care" days are allowed upon presentation of the "Medical absence Excuse Form";
- performance in university-sponsored events (athletic competitions, fine arts performances, ROTC activities, etc.): an original memo from the appropriate advisor must be provided;
- a death in the immediate family: documentation from a newspaper, funeral, memorial service, etc.
- religious holidays
- jury duty

Personal reasons for missing class cannot be excused. These include personal trips to attend university-sponsored events as a spectator, to visit family, to attend weddings or graduations, to attend court (except for jury duty), and other personal reasons, even when plane tickets have been purchased.

Please note: Documentation must be original, will be verified, and will be kept on file.

Schedule of Classes

Week 1. Our Plant Blindness and the Surprising Cultural History of Plants

August 20 *Introduction*

August 22 *Plant soul in Ancient Ontology and modern Botany*

Read: excerpts from Aristotle, Pseudo-Aristotle (in-class handout) and Chapter 1 in Hallé, *In Praise of Plants* (blackboard)

Week 2 The Enlightenment plant

August 27 *Plant Machines*

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

August 29 *Are you a Plant or a Human?*

Read: Finish La Mettrie

Week 3. The Romantic Plant 1

September 3 NO CLASS

September 5 *Plant-Human Mutuality*

Read: P. B. Shelley, "The Sensitive Plant," and Erasmus Darwin, *The Loves of Plants*, Loves (excerpts) on blackboard

Week 4 The Romantic Plant 2

September 10 *Posthuman and "Vegetable Sentience."*

Read: Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," on Blackboard. **First essay due** on questions distributed in advance

September 12 *Feminism and the Arabesque*

Read: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Giant Wistaria" (blackboard)

Week 5. The Modern Plant: From Botany to the Electric plant and Cinema

September 17 *Evolution and the Discovery of the Moving Plant*. Read: excerpts from Charles and Frances Darwin, *The Movement of Plants*, online source.

September 19 View: Percy Smith's shorts collected under the title "The Plants," on reserve at Levey Library, Jean Commandon, "The Growth of Plants," viewing in class

Week 6. The Monster Plant

September 24 Read: excerpts from Charles Darwin, *Insectivorous Plants*; Miller, "Monster

Plants”

September 26 View *The Thing from Another World*, on reserve at Leavey Library. **Second essay due** on questions distributed in advance

Week 7. Late Capitalism and Plants 1

October 1 **Mid-Term Exam**

October 3 *Plants the new Animals?* Read: Excerpts from Nealon, Plant Theory, on Blackboard

Week 8. Human-Plant Conversations

October 8 Pollan, “The Apple,” on blackboard.

October 10 Rath, “Take Me to the Apple Breeder”

Week 9. Late Capitalism and Plants II

October 15 Richter, “The Sleep of Plants” (blackboard)

October 17 Read: *Lab Girl*

Week 10. The Mesh and ecological fiction

October 22 Finish reading *Lab Girl*

October 24. Read: Annihilation, pp. 1-95

Week 11. Ecosystems and other hyperobjects

October 29 Read: excerpts from Morton, *Hyperobjects*. Discussion of *Annihilation*. Read: finish the novel

October 31 NO CLASS

Week 12. Plant Thinking

November 5 *Can Plants Think?* Read: Michael Marder's *Plant Thinking*

November 7 Read: excerpts from Marder and Tondeur, *Herbarium*, available online

Week 13. Late Capitalism and Plants III

November 12 *The Last Refuge?* Read, *The Vegetarian*, pp. 1-87.

November 14 Read, *The Vegetarian*, pp. 87-end.

Week 14. Presentations

November 19 Presentations

November 21 THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 15. Student presentations

November 26 Presentations.

November 28 Presentations

Final Essay Due Date TBD

Final Exam: Date TBA (if in doubt, please look up in the schedule of classes)

Required readings, films, and art

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

Darwin, Charles. *Insectivorous Plants*. London: John Murray, 1875. (Full text available on Darwin Online)

---. *The Power of Movement in Plants*. London: John Murray, 1880. (Full text available on Darwin Online)

Darwin, Erasmus. *The Botanic Garden. Part II. Containing The Loves of the Plants*. The Echo Library, 2007. (Bookstore)

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, "The Giant Wistaria" (1891) (Blackboard)

Jahren, Hope. *Lab Girl*. Penguin, 2016. (Bookstore)

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

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 at <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. (Excerpts on Blackboard)

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

Nyby, Christian (dir.), *The Thing from Another World*, 1951 (Leavey reserves)

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

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

Richter, Anne. "The Sleep of Plants." Trans. by Edward Gauvin. *Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2015). Ed. by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2015: 131-136. (Blackboard)

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

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

Additional (Recommended) Readings (students should consult this list in preparation for their final project)

Ayres, Peter. *The Aliveness of Plants: The Darwins at the Dawn of Plant Science*. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008.

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

Doherty, Dornith. *Archiving Eden*

---. *Archiving Eden II*.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M79V10prO90>
<http://vimeo.com/7260694>

Duffer, Matt and Ross Duffer, *Stranger Things*, 2017-

Hallé, Francis. *In Praise of Plants*. Portland, OR: Timber Press, 2002. (Additional chapters)

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

Kaufman, Philip. Dir. *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) (Leavey reserves)

Le Guin, Ursula, various novellas including "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow," "The Direction of the Road," and *The Word for World is Forest*

Marder, Michael. *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. (Additional chapters)

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.

---*Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013. (Additional chapters)

Powers, Richard. *The Overstory*. Norton, 2018.

Seto, Momoko. *Planet Z*. 2011.

<http://vimeo.com/48299450>

Siegel, Don. Dir. *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)

VanderMeer, Jeff. *The Southern Reach Trilogy*. (All three volumes)