

GESM 120 (35381) Seminar in Humanistic Inquiry

Fall 2024

Location: LVY 3V

Tuesday, Thursday: 3.30 pm - 4.50 pm

Prof. Antónia Szabari

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(My office is inside the main office suit of the Department of French & Italian)

Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday, 2.00-3.30 pm and by appointment—email me for meeting in person or via zoom!)

Plants Attack!

Plants are alive, yet they do not present us with the same impression of life as animals do. However, writers, poets, and philosophers have conjured up plants' specific way of being alive to invent new ways of seeing and thinking about plants and our world.

This course takes students through modern and contemporary philosophical and literary descriptions of plants zooming in on the strangeness of plants. The course is also inspired by the B-movie genre of “plant horror” (see *Little Shop of Horrors* and *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, among many), which we also discuss along with forays into more recent cinematic eco-horror featuring plants. We explore plants' strange and unique aliveness by taking two paths 1) noticing plants and caring for them allows us to see disturbing elements of modernity (especially through the ability of plants to reveal structures of domination, colonial, patriarchal, or capitalist) and 2) imagining new ways of living and making worlds.

No gardening experience or “green thumb” is required but rather an interest in literature, philosophy, photosynthesis, and a willingness to consider critical approaches to race, gender and sexuality, and ecology.

Requirements

Each student will be responsible for keeping up with the readings. The materials marked for each week need to be read by each Monday (by Wednesday, in weeks when Monday is off). Readings are available at the University Bookstore or electronically (Brightspace or www). I will post reading questions on Brightspace (under discussion board) after class on each Wednesday, which students need to respond to by class on the next Monday. Students will also give one short individual presentation (5-6 minutes, time to be assigned—please sign up on google sheet), write an in class and a take-home essay (4 pages), and give one final oral presentation (15 minutes). This final presentation will be discussed in class and it will serve as the basis of the final project, either a written essay

(7 pages) or a recorded presentation (15-20 minutes). There will also be a mid-term and final exam per university rules. The format of these exams will be discussed in class.

*Students are expected to comply with all aspects of USC's COVID-19 policy. Failure to do so may result in removal from the class and referral to SJACs.

Final grade breakdown

Class participation: 10%

Weekly responses to reading questions: 15%

Short presentation: 10%

First essay (in class, 20 mins. writing) 10%

Second essay (take home, 4 pages, on questions distributed in advance) 10 %

Midterm Exam: 10%

Long presentation (15 minutes): 10%

Final essay (7 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. Introduction: Botany, Colonial Sciences, Sci-Fi, Horror

August 26 Introduction: Plant blindness and the cultural history of botany

August 28 Discussion of LeGuin, "Vaster"-

Reading: "Vaster than Empires and More Slow"

Week 2 Different Perspectives on the Intelligence of Plants

Sept. 2 Labor Day-no class

September 4 lecture & discussion

Readings: "Introduction," *The Language of Plants*, pp. vii-xxi (Brightspace); "Prologue,"

Chamovitz, *What A Plant Knows*; excerpts, Mancoso

Week 3. Feminist Speculative Fiction and Advocacy

Sept. 9 lecture

Sept. 11 discussion

Readings: Richter, "The Sleep of Plants" (Brightspace); Myers, "Photosynthesis"

Week 4 Fantasy and New Animism

Sept. 16 lecture

Sept. 18 discussion

View: Miyazaki, *The Princess Mononoke*

Week 5. Resilience of the Living in Decolonial Plant Gothic

Sept 23 lecture—**first essay, in -class writing assignment (20 mins)**

Sept 25 discussion

Reading: Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night*

Week 6. The Queerness of Botany

September 30 lecture

October 2 discussion

Readings: Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night*

Week 7. Multispecies Perspective and Decentering Regimes of Dominance

October 7 lecture

October 9 discussion

Readings: Selyem, *It's Raining in Moscow*. Pp. TBD

Week 8. Indigenous Botany and Ecological Thinking

October 14 lecture

October 16 discussion

Reading: Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, pp TBD

Week 9. Dancing with Cosmic Plants: Metaphysics Upside-Down?

October 21 lecture-**second essay due (on questions distributed in advance, on Brightspace)**

October 23 discussion

Reading, Coccia, *Lives of Plants*, pp. TBD

Week 10. The Monster Plant in Los Angeles

October 28 **Midterm**

October 30 discussion

View: *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960)

Week 11. Political Plants

November 4 Lecture

November 6 Discussion

Read Marder, "Resist like a Plant" and excerpts from *Grafts*; Warren & Howard, *Trees 1*

Week 12: Eco-Gothic

November 11 lecture

November 13 discussion

Read: Liu: *The Dark Forest*

Week 13. Monster Plants 2

November 18 lecture

November 20 discussion

Read: Liu: *The Dark Forest*

Week 14. Student Presentations

November 25 Student Presentations

November 27 *Thanksgiving Break*

Week 15. Student Presentations

December 2 Student Presentations

December 4 Student Presentations

Final Examination: Check for date in schedule of classes

Final Projects Due December 9, end of the day

Required readings, films, and art (available on Brightspace, the University Bookstore, or on the www):

- “Introduction,” *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*. Ed. Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, Patricia Vieira. Minnesota UP, 2017, pp. vii-xxi. (Brightspace)
- Chamovitz, Daniel. *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses*. New York: Scientific American / Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 2012. (chapters available on Brightspace)
- Coccia, Emanuele. *Life of Plants*, Polity, 2018. (Brightspace)
- Corman, Roger, dir. *The Little Shop of Horror*. Santa Clara Productions, 1960.
- Ellis, Warren and Jason Howard. *Trees 1*. Image Comics, 2015. 978-1632152701
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Milkweed Editions, 2013. (Bookstore) 978-1571313560
- LeGuin, Ursula. “Vaster than Empires and More Slow,” *The Unreal and the Real: Selected Short stories of Ursula LeGuin*. Gallery/Saga Press, 2016. (Brightspace)
- Liu Cixin, *The Dark Forest (The Three-Body Problem: 2)*. Trans. Joel Martinsen. Tor Books, 2016. (Bookstore) 978-0765386694
- Mancuso, Stefano and Alessandra Viola, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence*, trans. Joan Benham, pref. Michael Pollan (Island Press, 2015). (selections on Brightspace)
- Marder, Michael. *Grafts: Writings on Plants*. Univocal, 2016. (Brightspace)
- . “Resist Like a Plant! On the Vegetal Life of Political Movements.” *Peace Studies Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2012, pp. 24-32, www.peacestudiesjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/PSJ-Vol5-Issue-1-2012.pdf. Accessed 4 Jan. 2022.
- Miyazaki, Hayao, dir. *Princess Mononoke*. Studio Ghibli, 1997.
- Myers, Natasha “Photosynthesis: Theorizing the Contemporary,” *Cultural Anthropology* website, January 21, 2016. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/790-photosynthesis> (www)
- Mootoo, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Grove Press, 2006, originally published in 1996. (Bookstore) 978-0802144621
- Richter, Anne. “The Sleep of Plants.” Trans. by Edward Gauvin. *Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology*. Ed. by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2015: 131-136. (Brightspace)
- Selyem, Zsuzsa. *It’s Raining in Moscow*. Trans. Erika Mihálycsa. Contra Mundum Press, 2020. Originally published in Hungarian in 2016. (Brightspace) 978-1940625393
- ??Tremblay, Paul. “Growing Things” in *Growing Things and Other Stories*. William Morrow, 2019. (Brightspace)

