

***Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, ed. by Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga
(New York: Palgrave, 2016)**

Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga's edited collection *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* accounts for and analyses the representation of monstrous and horrifying plant life across a range of modern literary and filmic texts. Investigating our anxieties about plant agency in the genres of science fiction and horror, it reads examples of monstrous vegetation as reminders of our generalised immortality and our ultimate return to nature. The volume comprises an introduction and thirteen essays, which combine to offer perceptive and nuanced insights into various literary and filmic manifestations of what they see as our innate dread of the 'wildness of vegetal nature' – of its 'untameability, its pointless excess, its uncontrollable growth' (p. 1).

The introductory chapter sets out six theses explaining why plants are so horrifying, echoing Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's 1996 essay on *Monster Culture*, which establishes seven theses on the monster. It is not useful to list all six theses here, but it suffices to say that each engages with aspects of plant life that linger on the verge of otherness. Embodying what the editors argue is an 'absolute alterity', plants are invisible, unknowable, purposeless, enact vengeful agency, and are an uncanny reminder of the organic and finite nature of humanity. Echoing Randy Laist, this introductory and explanatory chapter claims that '[p]lants "transect ontological boundaries" and challenge "our basic assumptions about what it means to be a living thing"' (p. 25). With this claim, the chapter lays the foundation for the critical perspectives that follow, each of which discusses, to some degree, how plant life registers a sense of the monstrous and of otherness in literary and filmic texts and contexts.

While the introduction is certainly compelling and sets out a controversial argument that is current, and that challenges our accepted definitions of the monstrous, it is unusual that it does not endeavour to establish the purpose of the book or to provide a rationale for its component chapters. In fact, it completely avoids chapter summaries or commenting on what might be the methodology or structure that shapes the collection. As such, it is difficult to ascertain the connection between the chapters that follow, or to glean their combined contribution to the field of research, beyond offering individual analyses of a selection of horror texts with plant monsters. As a result, while the individual chapters are certainly informative, well researched, and engaging (including the introduction itself), the collection

is not as conceptually robust as it could be, and the chapters seem to diverge from one another, somewhat diminishing the overall impact of the work.

The book therefore does not offer any definitive theories or arguments beyond the six theses, but it does provide some fascinating insights into plant monstrosity, which are sure to prompt further research and criticism in this emerging area. The introductory chapter presents a thought-provoking overview of plant horror in a range of historical and cultural contexts, including a discussion of ‘Green Man’ iconography and symbolism, and its assimilation into the art and architecture of Christianity. Originally occupying a somewhat uneasy position as part of the standard Christian narrative of good versus evil, the Green Man found a more complete rendering as a monstrous persona in literary form in the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a story that the editors read as representing the ‘perennial and terrifying ability of vegetal life to swallow, engulf, overrun, and outlive humans’ (p. 5). Editor Angela Tenga’s essay, ‘Seeds of Horror: Sacrifice and Supremacy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Wicker Man*, and *Children of the Corn*’, elaborates on this discussion while drawing connections with *The Wicker Man* (1973) and *Children of the Corn* (1984), claiming that ‘visions of vegetal menace’ in horror texts reflect larger anxieties within the cultures that produced them, in particular anxieties about climate change and the decline of the environment. With a focus on the motif of sacrifice and the ultimate return of the human body to nature, Tenga explores how a range of texts erodes the dichotomy between plant and animal life, reminding us that ‘as we ingest the vegetal world, so it will eventually digest us’ (p. 70).

The volume continues with a series of chapters that cover a range of topics from homuncular plants in Harry Potter to the monstrous vegetal in contemporary representations of the Amazon. Among these, Graham Matthews’ Chapter Six, ‘What We Think About When We Think About Triffids: The Monstrous Vegetal in Post-War British Science Fiction’, presents a shift in focus. This study initiates a run of three chapters on science fiction that analyse sentient plants, which, for Matthews, ‘expose and challenge the limits of anthropocentric thought’ (p. 111). Matthews contends that the post-apocalyptic scenario set out in John Wyndham’s 1951 novel *The Day of the Triffids* establishes a context in which thinking plants take on a new horrifying quality of being both mobile and sentient, which in turn upsets the metaphysical boundaries between plant and human, problematising the very notion of classification itself.

Acknowledging the importance of the horrifying triffid as a representation of absolute alterity, Gary Farnell, in Chapter Ten 'What Do Plants Want?', continues the discussion of plant agency, contextualising it within a post-WWII framework and in relation to the question of what impact war has had on our natural environment. Farnell's chapter examines plants in history, with a focus on 'killer plant narratives from the 1950s and after' (p. 180). Where Matthews discussed the concept of the *thinking* plant, Farnell approaches the *talking* plant 'as a reflex of Cold War imaginings' (p. 180), noting the triffids' association with totalitarianism in the novel. Importantly, Farnell notes that, in entering the frame of language, the invasive plants in Wyndam's story become creatures of desire, marking the short step 'from Big Brother to big "Other"' (p. 181). With reference to Michael Marder's 'philosophy of vegetal life', and his 'vegetal anti-metaphysics', Farnell draws our attention to the cultural and political emphasis placed on environmental issues since the late twentieth century, and the move from plant horror to plant sympathy in texts like *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960) and M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008). A useful and compelling argument is presented in Farnell's identification of a distinct shift in the approach of Western cultures toward a sympathetic view of the environment. This, Farnell argues, seems to have led to a new literary and cultural frame, in which literature and philosophy finally ask the vital question, 'what do plants want?'

By investigating the cultural breaks that underpin changing representations of monstrous vegetation in literature, film, and culture, the volume opens up a new and thought-provoking area of research on monstrosity. The final chapter in the collection, Matthew Hall's 'The Sense of the Monster Plant', speaks significantly to this investigative approach to the cultural contexts which produce Plant Horror, as does the ninth chapter in the collection, 'Sartre and the Roots of Plant Horror', by Randy Laist. Hall's consideration of the source of plant horror leads to a discussion of the theory of the 'abject carnival', a hybrid of Julia Kristeva's abjection and Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival, which, he argues, 'are really two sides of the self-same semiotic system', working, through chaos and inversion, to establish the limits of our known world.¹ In plant-horror texts such as *The Day of the Triffids*, the carnival dimensions of the plant invasion result in the suspension and inversion of hierarchies and cultural limits. Plants rule over humankind. However, they are also abject, threatening the stability of self, and prompting the expulsion of repressed natural facets of our being. In this

¹ Laist is quoting here from M. C. Vicks, *The Postmodern Oranus: Carnival and Abjection in Victor Pelevins' Homo Zapiens*, which argues that the abject and the carnival are linked in their disruption of systems of hierarchy and exclusion and in their threat to the rigid social structures which define our social and cultural realities (MA Thesis submitted to the University of Colorado, 2007).

way, they force us to rethink our domination of nature and to contemplate our repressed and intimate connection to it.

As mentioned earlier, the volume is not divided into sections and each chapter seems a stand-alone piece of work. There is, however, a distinct move toward the theoretical as the collection progresses – the latter chapters incorporating continental philosophy, queer theory, and ecocriticism – and Hall’s chapter provides a fitting conclusion to the discussion offered in the earlier essays by exploring, in some depth, the otherness of the sentient plant from an interdisciplinary perspective. While the chapters would benefit from the support of a framework, in the form of introductory commentary from the editors and sections that link chapters together thematically or theoretically, taken as a collection of research, the volume does work. Each chapter differs significantly from the others, offering an engaging read and a multiplicity of perspectives, and is bound to initiate vigorous discussions of plant agency in literature and culture. With its focus on horror, it is a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions of the monstrous in literature, film, and culture, coming at a critical time when our positive and reciprocal relationship with the natural environment is more tenuous than ever.

Maria Beville